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Secrecy and absence in the residue of post-9/11 covert counter-terrorism

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Abstract

This thesis examines how secrecy and absence shape the representation of covert counter-terrorism in the public sphere. Contemporary covert practices, from missile strikes by unmanned aerial vehicles to special forces 'kill/capture' operations, have come to exemplify U.S. counter-terrorism in public debate. This is significant because these practices shift the ethical stakes of witnessing state warfare. Previous scholarship on war and news media has argued that public glimpses of state violence, alongside official declarations, can demonise or dehumanise the targets of such violence, and thus prompt witnesses to accept the state's rationalisation of these actions and the use of secrecy. News coverage of contemporary covert action, however, offers no such glimpses. Instead, coverage draws primarily upon residue: the rumours and debris left behind. By applying this concept of residue to drone strikes, the special forces raid that killed Osama bin Laden, and kidnap rescue efforts in the Sahara-Sahel, the thesis argues that it is all this speculation, rubble, and empty space, rather than the state itself, which signifies to newsreaders the possibility of state secrecy. That suspicion of secrecy then frames the absences in this residue, the conspicuous lack of certain bodies and objects. Secrecy makes those absences appear suggestive, in that the latter cannot publicly corroborate different aspects of these unseen events. This allows residue to intimate – to hint at unverifiable ideas about that which is absent, in a way which can undermine more explicit claims and justifications of what has taken place.

To examine how this dynamic reframes the ethics of witnessing, the thesis develops an historical affiliation, a method of linking disparate practices of violence based on similar representational qualities, in order to examine whether witnessing is being shaped by these qualities in obscured or unspoken ways. This affiliation is made

between representations of covert counter-terrorism and those of lynching in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Despite their differences, in both cases unseen violence and absent bodies are represented as significant in their being disconnected from wider society and difficult to comprehend, to understand how and why the violence takes place. This occurs in today's counter-terrorism through hints and allusions from absence, which represent these covert events as physically intangible. As with lynching, violence and its casualties are implicitly represented in their absence as reflecting the public's intellectual and moral distance from the practice. This takes covert counter-terrorism beyond a binary of fostering assent or dissent towards the state. Instead of prompting newsreaders' complicity with state narratives for its actions, residue intimates doubts and unspoken possibilities about these events that curtail their rationalisation. In so doing, however, these representations marginalise the violence inflicted upon casualties from ethical consideration. They do so while obscuring how that marginalisation occurs, as newsreaders are prompted to see themselves as distanced from these events and to focus upon that distance, rather than on how absences are being given significance in the public sphere. Using the historical affiliation with lynching, the thesis concludes that an ethical witnessing of covert counter-terrorism through its residue cannot be based on an attempt to recognise and 'recover' lived experiences of suffering from rumours and debris. Rather, ethical witnessing would involve an awareness of how distance is constructed through that residue, and how this gives unspoken meaning to absence.

Lay summary

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, wars abroad have been documented and shown to populations 'back home' through news coverage, from accounts of battles and strategy to photographs and videos of soldiers in combat. This news coverage plays an important role in shaping what citizens of warring nations think of war, including its causes, the aims and objectives of their leaders, and crucially whether the war and its conduct is ethical. This coverage can make it more or less likely that citizens will support or oppose the war effort.

But one kind of warfare which does not obviously fit this pattern is covert counter-terrorism. Covert operations are actions designed so that the role of the state in carrying them out is kept hidden – the action is at least partly secret. A *secret* act of counter-terrorism would likely not appear in news coverage in the same way as a war that was officially declared; indeed, it would often be designed *not* to appear in the news. How does coverage of such actions therefore affect what newsreaders think of that violence, and the ethics of carrying it out?

This thesis examines this question by looking at news coverage of covert counter-terrorism over the last several years, specifically coverage of drone strikes, of the raid that killed Osama bin Laden, and of attempts to rescue hostages in northern Africa. Of course, secret state activities are not new, and covert operations were widely publicised during the Cold War and after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. The thesis argues, however, that the secret counter-terrorism carried out mainly by the United States today, namely drone strikes and special forces operations, are different from previous actions in terms of how they enter public debate. In the past, the U.S.

would pre-empt how people interpreted its secret actions by providing public narratives that justified those actions in the abstract, and crucially the secrecy surrounding them, as moral and necessary in the face of some existential threat. The U.S. would 'address' its secrecy to the public, explaining its use in terms of the magnitude of the threat and the need to carry out exceptional actions that it was better the public did not see. This explanation would be backed up by glimpses of covert agents carrying out such violence, provided either by the news or in popular fiction. The image of covert action produced as a result portrayed these operations as morally justified, by demonising or dehumanising those people who were the targets of that violence. By accepting this portrayal, citizens would assent to the state's secret use of violence.

Today this is no longer the case. While the U.S. still talks of a struggle against a terrorist threat around the world, government and military officials rarely acknowledge individual covert operations that appear in the news, and almost never explain why the use of secrecy was justified and ethical. In fact, the U.S. rarely confirms that secrecy itself. Nor do citizens get to see glimpses of these operations being conducted. Instead, journalists and activists gather together snippets of information, rumour and debris left behind by these operations, and use these to write news stories. It is these rumours and debris, and the lack of more substantial and clear information within them, that hint at the use of secrecy. How does this then affect how newsreaders are likely to understand counter-terrorism and the ethics surrounding it?

To answer this question, the thesis looks at what remains absent from this news coverage but is nonetheless hinted at or alluded to by the rumours, rubble and contradictions left behind by these covert operations. Because these speculations and debris are portrayed by journalists as evidence of unseen state actions, some absences start to stick out and become significant – for instance, the lack of evidence of the

identities of those killed. These absences stick out further when coverage hints at the U.S.'s use of secrecy, because that same lack of evidence appears not to have been covered up by the state. The thesis argues that these suggestive absences affect how newsreaders are likely to understand these operations. Absences are able to suggest to newsreaders that not everything might be as it appears, that perhaps some parts of the story do not fit the U.S.'s general narrative for counter-terrorism. For example, the uncertainties around casualties' identities become significant, suggesting the possibility that those killed were not actually the right targets. None of these ideas are confirmed or even spoken out loud by news coverage, but their mere possibility means that this coverage is unlikely to produce unquestioning support for U.S. counter-terrorism. The thesis therefore argues that we need to think about war and news media in ways that go beyond the idea of either assent or dissent towards war. Perhaps there are other positions in-between these two poles that newsreaders might adopt.

To examine this possibility, the thesis compares this news coverage and its absences with coverage of lynchings in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While the violence of both cases is of course very different, both were covered in newspapers at the time not through images of the violence itself, but through the rumours and objects left behind. Both were also portrayed as separate from wider society, as secluded and aberrant practices, and as therefore difficult to comprehend.

In the case of covert counter-terrorism, this difficulty is hinted at by the absences discussed above, which suggest that these operations are physically intangible in different ways – that drone strikes are too quick and too dispersed to follow clearly, and that the story of bin Laden's killing and its significance will remain uncertain and contradictory so long as footage of his death is kept hidden. Just as with lynchings a

century earlier, this idea that the violence is difficult to understand frames that violence as ethically important in terms of *distance*. Within this news coverage, the violence's physical distance from the public, as something that goes unseen, appears to produce an intellectual distance, focusing attention on the practice being difficult to understand. This in turn suggests a moral distance from the public as well, that the public are unconnected to the violence being carried out. Through this focus on distance and its consequences, other ethical questions about the infliction of violence on unseen casualties are sidelined. This does not produce public assent towards war, but nor does it encourage dissent. This news coverage and its absences make counter-terrorism seem ethically significant in some respects, but while marginalising other ethical issues.

Given this, the thesis concludes that we need to rethink what it means to ethically witness warfare, to view war through news coverage in a way that is ethical. Because news coverage in the past involved glimpses of violence, and was thought to shape public support for wars, ethical witnessing was framed as adopting a different attitude towards the people who appeared in those glimpses: of seeing them as ethical subjects in their own right, rather than accepting portrayals of them as inferior and deserving of violence. But because such portrayals are today regularly undermined by the hints and allusions discussed above, ethical witnessing cannot be reduced to this kind of change in attitude. Ethical witnessing would instead have to involve two things: first, an awareness of how an intellectual and moral distance between the public and these operations is constructed by this coverage; and second, a consideration of how that imagined distance marginalises other ethical questions about the violence itself. Ethics would involve a change in attitude towards the *absences* and the things left unsaid about these secret events, and an awareness of how we as newsreaders are actually connected to those absences and the meaning given to them through this coverage.

I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that, except where stated otherwise by reference or acknowledgement, the work presented is entirely my own. The thesis has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree.

Oliver Ben Kearns

3 March 2017

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“Even the most indelible things are of fixed duration, just like the things that leave no trace or never happen... Thus what we see and hear comes to be similar and even the same as what we didn't see or hear, it's just a question of time, or of our own disappearance... [T]he weak wheel of the world is pushed along by forgetful beings who hear and see and know what is not said, never happens, is unknowable and unverifiable.”

Javier Marías, *A Heart So White* (Marías, 2012: 27-8)

Introduction

Witnessing absence in contemporary counter-terrorism

“[T]here is no way to separate, under present historical conditions, the material reality of war from those representational regimes through which it operates and which rationalise its own operation.”

Judith Butler (2009: 29)

“The war will be won in large measure by forces you do not know about, in actions you will not see and in ways you may not want to know about.”

A.B. “Buzzy” Krongard, CIA executive director, 18 October 2001 (quoted in Landers, 2001)

Beginning: three moments

Three moments from the history of U.S. covert action help establish the aim of this thesis: to examine how the secrecy and absences of covert counter-terrorism shape its representation in the public sphere and affect the question of assent and dissent towards state violence.

The first moment is 30 September 1954, the dateline of a report commissioned by President Eisenhower and undertaken by retired Air Force Lieutenant General James H. Doolittle. At the time of the report, seven years after the founding of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the United States had carried out covert paramilitary operations in Albania alongside the British Secret Intelligence Service, paramilitary operations in Korea, support for Ukrainian and Polish anti-communist forces and

covert operations to overthrow Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran and President Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala (Stiefler, 2004: 635-8; Dujmović, 2012). In the face of increasing Congressional pressure for oversight of CIA activities, Eisenhower commissioned Lt. General Doolittle to head an investigation into the Agency's covert activities and make recommendations on its future conduct. The resultant report is worth quoting at length:

It is now clear that we are facing an implacable enemy whose avowed objective is world domination by whatever means and at whatever cost. There are no rules in such a game. Hitherto acceptable norms of human conduct do not apply. If the United States is to survive, long-standing American concepts of 'fair play' must be reconsidered. We must develop effective espionage and counterespionage services and must learn to subvert, sabotage and destroy our enemies by more clever, more sophisticated and more effective methods than those used against us. *It may become necessary that the American people be made acquainted with, understand and support this fundamentally repugnant philosophy* (Doolittle Commission, 1954: 2-3, emphasis added).

At the time, U.S. citizens were rarely presented with any examples of this philosophy, but the CIA nonetheless maintained strong relations with the mainstream press – for instance, the proprietor of *Time* magazine Henry Luce regularly spoke with members of the intelligence community, including CIA Chief Allen Dulles. Indeed, his magazine published a highly critical profile of Mosaddegh that implicitly justified intervention, before later reporting on the coup without mentioning the CIA's role (Mistry, 2013: 115). The significance of the Doolittle Commission report is that it advocated making the U.S. public *aware* of the CIA's role in covert action, that knowledge of its methods might be necessary in order to foster public support for the usurpation of 'fair play'. The Commission does not, however, call for individual actions to be made know – only the philosophy behind it. What Doolittle was calling for, then, was public awareness *of* secrecy, of *the kind of things* the CIA was doing away from the public eye, but not a display of the activities themselves.

Doolittle's report has been widely interpreted as an attempt to whitewash CIA activities, yet as Harold Greenburg points out, if that were so it was a lousy attempt. The secrecy surrounding the Doolittle Commission itself meant that the public learned little about it or its conclusions, but that secrecy was held up by Congressmen as further evidence of the need for CIA oversight (Greenburg, 2006: 691). Equally interesting was the report's call for the CIA to embody "an aggressive covert psychological, political and paramilitary organisation more effective, more unique and, if necessary, more ruthless than that employed by the enemy" (Doolittle Commission, 1954: 2). As Greenburg again points out, such a call advocates for "more complex and ambitious" operations that would increase the risk of "disclosure and implication of the US government" (Greenburg, 2006: 692). Perhaps the public would start to see examples of covert action after all. Both the commission of the report and the conclusions drawn by it therefore demonstrate the flexible and ambiguous relationship between the rationale and the secrecy of covert operations, as well as the potential for secrecy to become visible within and shape the public sphere.

The second moment is nearly forty years later, 1996, when retired career CIA officer Arthur S. Hulnick asked in an intelligence operations journal, "U.S. Covert Action: Does It Have A Future?" (Hulnick, 1996). Suggesting Doolittle's prescience, Hulnick argues that "a conscious decision was made early in the Cold War by America to be at least as devious and as clever as its main adversary, primarily because it saw no alternative if it was to protect itself against what was then viewed as the growing threat of Communism" (ibid: 145). But in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Hulnick is asking whether there is a place for covert action in U.S. national security policy. Answering this, according to Hulnick, requires knowing how to evaluate the success or failure of covert operations, something which "has received little attention". Short-term

successes can turn out to be long-term failures, and vice-versa. “Of course”, he notes, “the American public judges covert action mainly on the basis of what it learns from the press”, and while the public will “quickly hear about a covert action that fails”, they “will rarely hear about a successful venture” due to the CIA's inability to “anticipate revelations” – that is, to know when it is likely that their actions will be uncovered (ibid: 151, 153).

Hulnick's argument highlights the difference between the instrumental use of state secrecy for covert action and the uncontrollable consequences of that secrecy in the public sphere. The CIA may consider a successful covert operation to be one when no-one finds out about it, but if this means that the only public covert actions are failed covert actions then claims of overall success will be difficult for citizens to accept. Going beyond the Doolittle Commission's call for a public awareness of secrecy, Hulnick is making the case for publicising *details* of those secrets. As with Doolittle, this argument appears to be premised on the likelihood that covert operations will be revealed: “Remembering that covert actions – especially those that require large numbers of personnel and resources – will likely become public, the intelligence system needs to consider methods of explaining its covert actions to the public in an organised fashion”, to “prepar[e] ahead of time for the inevitable revelations” (ibid: 153-4). In other words, given that state secrecy is likely to be discovered and even undone, shaping the public meaning of that secrecy becomes just as important to a covert action as the logistics of the operation and, indeed, its covertness.

The final moment brings us close to the present, 21 October 2015. Satellite imagery from Google Earth is used as evidence of ongoing covert U.S. activities in the Horn of Africa. The imagery appears to show the gradual build-up of a U.S. military base in Djibouti. Chabelley Airfield began life in 2013 as a “lower-profile airstrip” to

house the Pentagon's fleet of unmanned aerial vehicles or drones, which had previously been held ten kilometres away at Camp Lemmonier in Djibouti's capital. But in the following two years the “bare-bones compound once used by the French Foreign Legion” was transformed, from a temporary base for Pentagon and CIA drone operations in the region, to an “enduring” base subject to a “long-term implementing arrangement” with the Djiboutian government. According to Nick Turse, this upgrade includes a security system of sensors, cameras, radar and thermal imaging devices, designed around a 7,720 metre perimeter fence (Turse, 2015b). Satellite images of the base in 2013 and in March 2015 visualise this upgrade (ibid; Figure 1). The image taken in April 2013 appears to show a demarcated square of desert housing only some small structures and vehicles in one of its corners. The image from March 2015 shows that now-cordoned-off area filled with buildings, a large airstrip and the familiar grey outlines of unmanned drones, now surrounded by much more prominent fencing. The number of vehicles dotted around the site and the haphazard arrangement of the drones suggest activity – this appears to be a base very much in use.



Figure 1: Google Earth satellite images of Chabelley Airfield, Djibouti, April 2013 and March

2015 (Turse, 2015b).

At first glance, these images appear to reveal something that previously was secret. Revelation seems embedded in the images, and indeed that is how they are framed by the accompanying news article, as evidence of a hidden U.S. military build-up in Africa. Yet the images are also interesting because of what they do not show. There are no images of covert operations being undertaken here, no covert agents carrying out paramilitary activities. No idea is offered of individual operations being enacted from this site, and the vehicles, planes and buildings shown give no clear sense of something *happening* in the captured moment. The accompanying article notes that “[t]he military is tight-lipped about Chabelley, failing to mention its existence in its public list of overseas bases and *refusing even to acknowledge questions about it* — let alone offer answers”. It is left, then, to “[o]fficial documents, satellite imagery, and expert opinion” to establish that “Chabelley is now essential to secret drone operations throughout the region” (ibid, emphasis added). What the satellite images do, then, is *hint at* ongoing state secrecy. They do not confirm that secrecy, nor do they offer concrete, definite details of those secrets. That the base is related to drone operations seems reasonably clear. But beyond indicating ongoing operations involving the U.S. and drones, these images, like other satellite imagery of secret bases (Perkins and Dodge, 2009), seem to primarily *represent secrecy* in a particular way – as being related to particular configurations of space, as requiring an infrastructure, and as possibly wide-ranging – rather than represent the *uncovering* of secrets.

The snatched details surrounding the decision to upgrade the Chabelley airfield add to this representation of secrecy. Turse states that the Pentagon's drone contingent was moved there as a response to numerous cases of drones crashing around Camp

Lemmonier, including in residential areas, as well as to local air traffic controllers who “ignor[ed] pilots’ communications and forc[ed] U.S. aircraft to circle above the airport until low on fuel”. When the drones were moved, an Air Force engineering publication cited the fact that the move “provid[ed] operations anonymity from the International Airport” as one of its “significant accomplishments” (ibid). This third moment, then, demonstrates the persistent overlapping of secrecy and publicity even in the absence of the kind of state proclamations that Doolittle and Hulnick suggested. These overlaps range from the material manifestation of secret operations in public space (Paglen, 2010) to the representation of ongoing secrecy through allusion in the public sphere.

Each of these three moments demonstrate different ways in which secrecy, that is, the keeping of secrets, can become a recognisable part of public discourse and have consequences which exceed the rationales of state officials. The Doolittle Commission raises the possibility of the state publicly articulating that it carries out certain kinds of activities in secret, without revealing any individual operation; yet the secretion of that very report was represented by Congress as justifying further transparency from the CIA. Hulnick suggests that the state articulate details of covert operations in order to demonstrate their success, but does so in light of the strong possibility that details will become public anyway – through leaks, revelations or the inability to keep operations hidden – and may suggest failure instead. The possibility of covert activities at Chabelley is represented through objects, images and documents in the public sphere that are pointed to as evidence; however, these objects, and the possibility that they indicate covertness, are not acknowledged at all by the state. In each case, actual and hypothetical, articulations by both state *and* non-state actors together produce secrecy in the public sphere and shape the appearance and meaning of that secrecy, above and beyond what any one actor may have intended.

The interaction between these different articulations of secrecy speaks to the paradox implicit in the juxtaposition of the two quotes at the beginning of this Introduction. While Judith Butler highlights the importance of public representations of warfare to the conduct and dynamics of that warfare, former CIA executive director Buzzy Krongard alludes to the likelihood that a large proportion of U.S. counter-terrorism in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks may be designed *not* to be represented in public at all. The notion that contemporary warfare 'operates' through representational regimes, to use Butler's words, is complicated as a result: much contemporary warfare may in fact be intended to have no such operation in public discourse. Yet the three moments discussed demonstrate that this intention does not settle the matter, since the act of keeping these operations secret can itself be articulated and thus bring that covert warfare into public discourse *even as* it remains largely secreted. In-between these two claims about contemporary counter-terrorism, then, lies the possibility that such state activities may exist in part through representational practices that signify secrecy, that indicate things are happening that 'you do not know about' or that 'you will not see'.

But beyond this possibility, the differences between the three moments outlined above elaborate upon the paradox of Butler's and Krongard's statements. For while Doolittle called for the public to be made known of the U.S. state's covert capabilities, and while Hulnick suggested that public revelations of covert action should be framed by that state, the secret activities hinted at in the Chabelley images have neither been revealed nor acknowledged by the United States. The secrecy surrounding that base and its drone operations has been produced independent of any state proclamations around it. This speaks to the full implications of Krongard's words: that the state may not even articulate its own secrecy in the case of contemporary covert counter-terrorism.

Knowledge of these operations may instead be gained from traces left behind by these operations in the public sphere, snippets of information and fragments of debris which are pointed to as possible evidence of covert activities that have passed unseen. If this is so, then Krongard's acknowledgement complicates Butler's assertion. War may well be inseparable from its public representation, but that war need not be overt, and that representation may not be wholly or even partly produced by those conducting the war. As a result, the question of how representational practices rationalise 'the material reality of war' – that is, how they explain the use and conduct of state violence such that it appears justifiable or legitimate – is not self-evident. Consider again the details and images of the Chabelley airfield. Does this representation through assembled documents and satellite imagery rationalise the operation of covert drone attacks? What exactly would constitute rationalisation in this context? And what claim do these materials make regarding their relationship to the material reality of that covert war?

This thesis is aimed at unravelling that paradox in the counterpoising of Butler's and Krongard's statements. In the wake of counter-terrorism being increasingly defined and argued over as a *covert* activity, the thesis asks what happens when the public representation of state violence turns to activities which appear designed to be partially or wholly secret, and where that secrecy is not solely articulated by the state in question. If public representations are inextricably linked to contemporary war-making, and if much contemporary counter-terrorism is conducted in secret, how is that covert counter-terrorism represented in public discourse? What is the role of state secrecy in this representation? And how do these representations affect the rationalisation of state violence? These are the questions this thesis aims to examine and answer.

These questions broach the broader issue of the public representation of warfare and counter-terrorism, areas of research within which this thesis situates itself. The

issue of how warfare is represented to the populations of those states which conduct it has been tied to questions of what it means to witness violence and its attendant suffering; of the role of violence's perpetrators in shaping that representation; and crucially of how that representation prompts the witness to respond. The representations analysed in this thesis give novel answers to all of these questions and insodoing re-frame the issue of responsiveness: of what it means to encounter mediations of state violence and to adopt a position towards them such that they are comprehensible or meaningful; and of the consequences this has on the ethical significance accorded to that violence. This analysis, in other words, speaks to the relationship between ethics and the representation of state violence.

The thesis proposes that contemporary covert counter-terrorism forces a rethink of this relationship due to the interaction in its public representation between state secrecy and traces of covert violence – what the thesis theorises as *residue*. When faced with a representation of covert state activities like the materials related to the Chabelley airfield, the crucial question is this: *what* is being represented in those documents and satellite images? What are we being prompted to see and understand? Are we being presented with a revelation of covert violence, a glimpse of it being carried out? Is state secrecy being articulated to us by a political actor? And do these images and snatched details about these activities prompt us to assess these activities, the state and its targets in any particular way? If so, does the meaning produced by this representation rationalise the operations that are possibly underway? The answers to these questions will have implications for how we conceptualise the relationship between the state, the public, secrecy and the public residue that constitutes representations of covert counter-terrorism.

In the course of the so-called War on Terror, the relationship between the

public, the state and representations of violence has predominantly been conceptualised in one narrow manner, such that counter-terrorism, both overt and covert, has been interpreted as shaping subject-positions of public assent towards those state practices. Scholars have argued that public portrayals of counter-terrorism are intelligible or “make sense” from “a certain interpretive position” which these portrayals thereby prompt witnesses to adopt (Laffey and Weldes, 2004: 28). This interpretive position has been theorised as one which accepts the state's own rationalisation of its actions. The thesis argues that the covert activities discussed herein do not fit this model. In fact, they expand the range of possibilities regarding public responsiveness to representations of state violence, going beyond what previous scholarship on state secrecy and on witnessing state violence has considered. The subject-positions shaped by representations of contemporary covert counter-terrorism go beyond a binary of assent or dissent towards state rationalisations of its violence. Instead of making covert operations meaningful in terms of a state rationale, these representations make this counter-terrorism meaningful in terms of its apparent intangibility. This represents these operations as discomfiting but for very particular reasons: this intangibility produces implicit doubts and questions about these operations, but it also has the potential to marginalise the violence inflicted on unseen bodies from ethical consideration, to frame that infliction as irrelevant to the political and ethical significance of these operations. To talk of assent or dissent in this context, or to theorise complicity with some hegemonic frame of meaning, occludes the complexity of the representations and subject-positions produced here. How to conceptualise these dynamics in more sophisticated ways therefore forms part of the answer that the thesis gives to the questions outlined above.

Before getting to this answer, the aim of this Introduction is threefold: first, to

outline what is meant here by contemporary covert counter-terrorism, both in terms of the operations themselves and in terms of the definition of covert action; second, to place this analysis in the context of the research field of war and media representations, detailing the concepts that have arisen from this field and the arguments made about their relationship; and thirdly, to examine the position of covert action in International Relations scholarship, in order to explain how the narrow conceptualisation of covert operations and their secrecy in IR mirrors dominant understandings of the 'rationalisation' of warfare through news media. This mirroring prompts the Introduction finally to propose that the two research fields be brought together at the publicity-secrecy intersection: that research on the representation of war and counter-terrorism consider the role of *covert*ness in that representation; and that research on covert action in IR consider these activities' *public* existence beyond the hidden archives of the state. This intersection is where the theorisation and analysis of the thesis itself begins.

That analysis focuses primarily on national newspaper coverage of covert counter-terrorism in Britain and the United States, with some additional reference to social media when overlapping with that coverage. Despite declines in circulation, traditional print media continue to shape public discourse around international news and foreign policy, through both agenda-setting (that is, shaping perceptions of the importance of issues (Singer, 2016: 6)) and use as a primary source of news. The 2016 Reuters Institute Digital News Report finds that while only 26% and 35% of population samples in the U.S. and UK respectively access news via print media, compared to 73% and 72% for online media (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2016: 86), traditional news organisations dominate people's online sources. Across the 26 countries surveyed, 69% of people sampled use newspaper brands to access news online

(48% in the U.S., 46% in the UK), compared to 45% for 'digital-born' brands (admittedly 59% in the U.S., but only 31% in the UK) (ibid: 27, 89). Worldwide, *The New York Times*, *MailOnline*, *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian* and *The Wall Street Journal* are ranked 5th, 8th, 9th, 10th and 11th respectively in terms of estimated unique monthly visitors to news websites (ahead of BBC News at 13th), using data from the month to 1 January 2017 (*eBizMBA*, 2017).

Rather than signal the death of one medium (newspapers) and the birth of another (online news), the changing news media landscape involves the convergence of different media. News media whose distinct forms – as newspapers, radio and television programmes – historically shaped how their content was consumed are now increasingly amalgamated within novel media outlets, most obviously the Internet. This produces fluctuating global audiences who consume news in hybrid forms that combine print, still and moving images, interactive and social media components (Conway, 2012: 449-50).

Building on this multiplicity of production and circulation, the key reason for national newspapers' continued relevance is their salience within public discourse on international politics. Hybrid forms of national newspaper coverage are relatively dominant among sources for online news (see above), among those news articles being cited, hyperlinked to and discussed within political blog networks (Meraz, 2009) and among those shared by journalists on social media such as Twitter (Russell et al, 2015). This social media platform is “favoured by journalists, politicians, and heavy news users in particular” (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2016: 11), and Twitter users who read British and U.S. newspaper websites appear to disproportionately favour hard news articles, relative to their share of print space (Bastos, 2015: 317-8, 320-21). Because of this continued circulation and salience, the thesis analyses print newspaper

articles, newspapers' online versions of these articles and their online-only content, as well as some limited representative Twitter news coverage when it overlaps with traditional news media (for instance, through hyperlinks or journalists' online presence).

This dynamic of production and circulation across different media bears on the thesis' choice of particular national newspapers as primary data sources, subject to backdated online accessibility. This choice includes all UK-wide British tabloid and broadsheet newspapers, with the exception of the *Financial Times*, the *i*, and the *Morning Star*, making 18 newspapers (including Sunday editions),¹ accessed via Lexis-Nexis and newspapers' own websites where appropriate (for instance, to analyse graphical content). In the United States, it includes *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal*, three of the highest-circulating newspapers in the U.S. (Cision, 2016), accessed via separate online databases and newspapers' websites; the choice of three among the ten highest-circulating U.S. daily newspapers is weighted towards those which also score highly for unique monthly visitors to their websites (*eBizMBA*, 2017). The difference in the quantity of U.S. and British newspapers analysed reflects their respective international affairs coverage: on average, these U.S. newspapers cover international and security politics far more extensively than their British counterparts. The three U.S. newspapers analysed have also been found to significantly shape the agendas of other media, such as television news (Golan, 2006), to be predominantly cited online (Meraz, 2009), and to be subscribed to and circulated on social media above their print circulation levels (Ju et al, 2014: 9; Russell et al, 2015). (While *The Washington Post* is technically not a national newspaper, it is “the leading newspaper in the nation's capital” and shares in this inter-media influence (Izadi and Saghave-Biria, 2007: 148).)

1 These include: *Daily Mail*, *Daily Star*, *Daily Star Sunday*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Express*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *Independent on Sunday*, *Mail on Sunday*, *The Mirror*, *The Observer*, *The People*, *The Sun*, *The Sunday Express*, *The Sunday Mirror*, *The Sunday Telegraph*, *The Sunday Times*, and *The Times*.

Finally, the production and circulation of newspaper coverage through other media forms is increasingly accompanied by the filtering of other media channels *through* more traditional outlets. While the rise of the internet and social media appeared to spell the end of mainstream news media's importance, the latter have adjusted to this new media ecology by predicting and pre-empting the disruptive influence of these other media. In the case of war, counter-terrorism and political upheavals, mainstream news media now often acts as a 'networked gatekeeper', re-contextualising and reproducing social media content such that it selectively represents and changes the meanings attached to that content (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2015: 1325-9; Ali and Fahmy, 2013; Meraz and Papacharissi, 2013). The result, as Hoskins and O'Loughlin argue with reference to coverage of war, is that "[a]ny content that is acclaimed as alternative, oppositional, or outside only acquires significant value when acknowledged and reiterated by the mainstream" (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2015: 1321). This makes it only more important to examine national newspaper coverage: not only is that coverage produced and circulated outside print form, it also influences, incorporates and reiterates other media coverage.

The 'dark side' of the War on Terror

The prosecution of counter-terrorism outside official war theatres through secretive means has its roots prior to the events of 11 September 2001. Todd et al contextualise the recent growth of the U.S. intelligence services and wider use of covert action within the rise of the neo-conservative doctrine of pre-emptive warfare or 'anticipatory self-defence', as promoted by such figures as Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle and Donald Rumsfeld, both outside of office and as part of the Ford and Reagan administrations. While the notion of pre-emption during this time was aimed squarely at the Soviet

Union, the latter's demise led the neo-conservatives to promote pre-emption as a way of preventing any other state power from aspiring to challenge U.S. hegemony (Todd et al, 2009: 71-7). For the neo-conservatives, establishing this pre-emption doctrine first required re-establishing broad executive authority in the face of increased attempts during the 1980s and '90s to constrain and scrutinise that power, particular regarding covert action and intelligence activities. These attempts were prompted both by the Church Committee investigations into covert operations and by the revelation of illegal assistance being given by Reagan administration members to the Contra insurgents in Nicaragua (Scahill, 2013: 10-12).

In the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks, the neo-conservative doctrine of pre-emption was folded into a growing understanding that U.S. strategic primacy could not be maintained only by deterring state rivals; it required countering unconventional transnational threats, something which could not be done through conventional military superiority. In the years after 11 September 2001, the Pentagon therefore reformulated strategic primacy to include an emphasis on 'unconventional warfare' (Ryan, 2011: 368). This reformulation aligned with the expansion of executive authority that was now being promoted by the neo-conservatives in the Bush administration. Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld promoted the transformation of U.S. defence capabilities away from a reliance on large field armies and towards a lighter footprint model built on new technology and special forces. This led to an expansion of special forces, a growth in the Pentagon's intelligence capabilities and the beginning of at least two domestic surveillance programmes. Crucially, all these policy moves were justified in classified legal opinions as the necessary enactment of Presidential prerogative as sanctioned by Congress after the 11 September 2001 attacks (Todd et al, 2009: 79-83). In 2004, U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) was

designated the lead military command for planning global counter-terrorism operations (Ryan, 2011: 368-9). Alongside this growth in Pentagon influence and unconventional warfare capabilities was a push prior to 11 September by Bush administration officials, such as National Security Council member Richard Clarke, to instruct the Central Intelligence Agency to carry out a wide-ranging covert action programme against Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda. In particular, Clarke and others wanted to instruct the CIA to attempt to kill members of the al Qaeda leadership, an action understood by both proponents and critics as one that would overturn previous understandings of U.S. executive orders which banned assassination (Scahill, 2013: 3-7, 17-19).

On 17 September 2001, that instruction was given by a classified Presidential Directive, which is reported to have authorised covert operations across the globe in the form of both 'targeted killings' of designated individuals, without the need for signing off by the President, and the kidnapping, detention and interrogation of suspected terrorists (Gow, 2001; Priest, 2005; Kibbe, 2011: 373-5; Scahill, 2013: 20). Two days later, Rumsfeld wrote a memo of guidance to the heads of all the U.S. geographical military commands, instructing them to help draft plans for military operations against *worldwide* targets, "even outside the Middle East... our field of action is much wider than Afghanistan" (quoted in Ryan, 2011: 367). In 2006 this notion of a worldwide unconventional counter-terrorism operation was codified in the Pentagon's Quadrennial Defence Review. The QDR clarified that the terrorist threat was a transnational phenomenon and therefore required "multiple, irregular asymmetric operations", from counter-insurgency to psychological operations and unconventional warfare, all of which would involve "conducting war in countries we are not at war with" (quoted in *ibid*).

The result of these moves by Bush administration officials was the creation of a

military-intelligence apparatus able to carry out a wide range of covert actions with limited oversight. The Presidential finding signed on 17 September authorised an umbrella programme code-named Greystone, which relied on the legal opinion that Congress had granted the President the authority to target any al Qaeda suspect anywhere in the world. All covert actions were thus considered to have been pre-authorised by Congress. This led to the creation of “a series of compartmentalised programs... that, together, effectively formed a global assassination and kidnap operation” (Scahill, 2013: 24). These new covert programmes included the CIA's rendition and detention programme, which involved a fleet of aircraft and secret prisons in a number of countries around the world, as well as the so-called kill/capture programme authorising the CIA and, in theory, the Pentagon's covert special forces under the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), to target al Qaeda suspects for assassination without the need for individual Presidential approval (ibid: 24-30; Turza, 2013). Having been principally taken up by the CIA, this authorisation for covert action was complemented by an 'execute order' from Rumsfeld in early 2004, which gave pre-approvals for U.S. special forces to carry out lethal operations in fifteen to twenty countries where al Qaeda operatives were suspected of operating or receiving sanctuary. Rumsfeld had previously argued that Congress had effectively authorised covert military action around the world, which had led him and Vice-President Dick Cheney to direct JSOC to begin manhunt operations paralleling those of the CIA. Alongside Rumsfeld's pre-approval of more such operations in 2004, a new Presidential Directive codified SOCOM's authority to conduct lethal action in such operations, outside an official battlefield (Schmitt and Mazzetti, 2008; Niva, 2013: 191; Scahill, 2013: 91-101, 170-1).

While much has been made of the apparent transformation of both the CIA and

the Pentagon during these processes, with each supposedly taking on the traditional role of the other – a paramilitary CIA, an intelligence-focused Pentagon (Jehl and Schmitt, 2004; Miller, 2004; Ambinder, 2013; for discussion, see Khalili, 2014: 420-1) – many of the covert programmes authorised in the period following 11 September 2001 have been conducted by both institutions. By President Obama's first term, this had evolved to the two working in concert along with other U.S. security and intelligence agencies, sharing information and equipment and jointly prosecuting or coordinating covert raids and missile strikes in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia (Priest and Arkin, 2011; Niva, 2013: 196-7; N. Shah, 2014: 163-7). By 2009 the CIA and JSOC were running parallel kill/capture programmes in Pakistan with each using drones, raids and private security contractors (Scahill, 2013: 251-3); by 2011 the two agencies were “coordinat[ing]” drone strikes in Yemen “even as operations unfold[ed]”, drawing on each other's fleets and intervening in one another's planning (Miller, 2011). At the beginning of Obama's first term, General David Patraeus signed a secret directive authorising small teams of special forces to conduct clandestine operations outside the official war theatres of Afghanistan and Iraq, without the need for President Obama's direct approval of each operation. The directive represented an attempt to build upon Donald Rumsfeld's execute order six years earlier (Scahill, 2013: 282-3).

These parallel and joint kill/capture operations now take two forms. Personality strikes are those kill/capture operations that rely upon so-called 'kill lists' of potential targets. Intelligence personnel build up profiles of individuals which are then passed up the chain of command to national security advisers and the President. Once approved, that target is added to a kill list and approval given to attempt to kill or capture the individual within a certain amount of time, for instance, sixty days for JSOC strikes (Currier, 2015). The CIA and JSOC each have their own separate kill lists and run

parallel drone programmes to act upon them; reportedly, the rules governing the CIA's kill/capture missions are somewhat looser than for the Pentagon in both Yemen and Pakistan (Worth et al, 2013; Entous, 2015). Based on available information, it appears that the authority granted the President by Congress in 2001 to target those behind the 11 September attacks is interpreted broadly, leading to strikes against 'associated forces' far beyond the ranks of al Qaeda (Landay, 2013; Serle, 2014b). The other form of operation is the so-called signature strike, prosecuted on the basis of 'pattern of life' analysis conducted by intelligence agents, which involves gathering data on unidentified individuals' daily movements within a certain spatial area and identifying any 'suspicious' activity based on pre-defined categories of probabilistic threat. In short, targets are constructed based on judgements from daily movements of the likelihood of future terroristic activity (Crampton et al, 2014: 207-9).

The procedures for approving both personality and signature strikes have now been streamlined, with joint CIA-State Department-JSOC analysis of kill list submissions and the augmentation of those separate lists by a so-called disposition matrix, a growing database of biographies, analysis and kill/capture strategies, "creating an operational menu that spells out each agency's role in case a suspect surfaces in an unexpected spot" (Miller, 2012a). The ratio of personality to signature strikes remains unknown. However, given reports of stricter rules governing personality strikes, the small proportion of kill/capture operations that kill mid- to high-level militant organisers and the much larger number of drone strikes that are carried out compared to the number of known individuals on kill lists, it seems probable that signature strikes are the dominant method (Becker and Shane, 2012; Heller, 2013: 90; Landay, 2013; Currier, 2015).

Under President Obama, the kill/capture programme of special forces

operations and missile strikes has expanded dramatically. In the fiscal year ending 30 September 2014, U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) had deployed to 133 countries, carrying out both kill/capture raids and training exercises. This includes covert and clandestine forces under the command of JSOC, operating so-called Forward units of small teams in countries across the Middle East and Africa (Turse, 2015a). The growth of special operations forces and both CIA and JSOC drone capabilities has involved an expansion of military and CIA bases in the Horn of Africa, the Arabian Peninsula and the wider Middle East, in order to expand U.S. special forces' scope and to accommodate the geographical reach and flight time capabilities of different drones (Ryan, 2011: 370-1; Turse, 2012: 21-31). This infrastructure has been accompanied by an expansion of espionage and intelligence-gathering capabilities, including an increased reliance on signals intelligence, airborne surveillance, and recruitment of clandestine operatives for the Pentagon's Defence Intelligence Agency (Krishnan, 2013: 286; Whitlock, 2012; Miller, 2012b).

The salient point regarding the kill/capture programme and these expanded operations outside of official war theatres is that they share levels of secrecy. All of these state activities are, to one extent or another, hidden from the U.S. and partner state populations – their enactment is not officially announced, their activities are often designed so as to remain secret, and state officials do not acknowledge these operations if and when they are uncovered. These operations stand in stark contrast to the military interventions in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, which have been interpreted as intensely visualised affairs. These wars were seen to saturate the public sphere with textual and visual images of their enactment, from the 'shock and awe' campaigns of aerial bombing to subsequent prolonged counter-insurgency (Mirzoeff, 2005; 2011: 277-309).

The operations described above have not been presented to the public in the same manner. The representations of these practices in public discourse have instead been framed by the idea that they are secret state activities, that they are not designed to produce a flood of images that will shape public understandings. Their secrecy has been a vital aspect of their representation. In an interview on NBC's *Meet the Press* on 16 September 2001, U.S. Vice-President Dick Cheney emphasised the difference between the mediation of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars for the public and the mediation of these covert operations: "We have to work, through, sort of the dark side, if you will. We've got to spend time in the shadows of the intelligence world. A lot of what needs to be done here will have to be done quietly, without any discussion, using sources and methods that are available to our intelligence agencies, if we're going to be successful. That's the world these folks operate in" (*NBC News' Meet the Press*, 2001).

If the covert operations outlined above represent the dark side that Cheney envisioned, then the secrecy that surrounds them may well be an important factor in their public representation. Any analysis of such representations will need to consider the relationship between secrecy and publicity that is enacted within them.

The representation of war and ethical witnessing

The two quotes from Judith Butler and Buzzy Krongard discussed earlier frame the representation of warfare as a question of how such representation may legitimise or rationalise the state actions portrayed. Butler elaborates upon the relationship between war, representation and rationalisation through the idea of recognition, of how people are prompted by representations to understand the lives of others and their suffering. This is a matter of the "general terms, conventions and norms" produced through

representational practices that determine what can be a “recognisable subject”, that determine what it is “to qualify... as a life or, indeed, as part of life” (Butler, 2009: 5, 3). Recognisability in turn affects the rationalisation of state violence: lives which do not meet the criteria for being recognised *as* lives therefore cannot be grieved; as such, they can be exposed to violence without some countervailing force of grief and outrage from states' populations (ibid: 24-5). War, then, is rationalised by the production of certain populations as not lives and therefore as ungrievable.

Butler's notion of the unequal distribution of grievability speaks to the broader field of study into war and representation, which conceptualises a link between the representation of suffering and the meanings attached to state warfare. The process of representation, subject-formation and rationalisation that Butler implies here requires unpacking through this literature. The question of the representation of warfare is framed in the literature as a question of witnessing suffering: of the political ethics of being confronted with representations of suffering and of responding to those representations. In this context, witnessing is tied to the idea of *co-presence*, of the sensory experience of proximity to events. While for some this proximity is a matter of physical closeness to an event and an embodied experience that results (Peters, 2001), for many within war representation studies witnessing can occur through a relation between representation and audience (Frosh, 2009: 56). From this perspective, mediations can prompt an experience of co-presence by signifying their own “liveness [and] immediacy” in relation to an event, and by addressing the audience as being co-present with the journalist or narrator as she experiences or details that event in the representation (ibid: 52). While this signification cannot fully efface the fact that the mediation is just that, a representation at a spatial and temporal distance from the real event, it can prompt readers and viewers to “make themselves imaginatively present at

the event” through the experience of that representation, as well as through the knowledge that one is experiencing the mediation as part of a collective, a disparate group of people reading the same newspaper or watching the same television programme (ibid: 58). This mediated co-presence is therefore not total – witnesses are still aware of “remain[ing] in the here and now” – but is an acceptance of the representation's presumed intention to articulate a real event and to prompt this imagining of co-presence, 'as if' one were there (ibid: 59-60).

This prompted imagining of co-presence determines the potential for witnessing, including the witnessing of suffering in representations of war. The importance of the potential for witnessing for this literature is that this potential is conceptually tied to the meanings and ethical significance given to suffering in representations. It is through co-presence that meaning is attached to violence and suffering. This suggests that the act of witnessing is more than merely *seeing* suffering via physical proximity or mediation, since it is centrally about how readers and viewers come to *understand* that suffering. But as Sue Tait notes, that co-presence or “proximity to the real” is nevertheless posited by this literature as essential to the shaping of this meaning and ethical significance, as “lay[ing] a moral burden on the audience” (Tait, 2011: 1224). If they are judged as trustworthy, these representations of co-present suffering will be “invest[ed]... with a force of authentic testimony” that allows them to signify particular ethical significances for the witness regarding that which is represented (Chouliaraki, 2009: 218). The act of co-present witnessing is thereby given an ethical underpinning in this literature.

For represented suffering to be accorded ethical significance, then, requires that witnesses be made co-present with that suffering. But this co-presence is not sufficient: the shaping of co-presence can allow for a recognition of suffering's ethical import, but

it can also occlude such recognition. The signification and thus potential recognition of suffering's ethical significance is determined by *how* that suffering is represented and the subject-positions produced as a result from which that suffering is comprehensible. The literature in this research field broadly conceptualises ethical significance in terms of whether represented suffering posits the ethical import to the witness of the sufferer's experience of suffering, or whether it instead signifies its meaningfulness as a mere display of that suffering for aesthetic contemplation. Each of these significations “[invest] suffering with certain ethical orientations regarding what is legitimate and fair to feel and do towards [that suffering]” – that is, they prompt readers and viewers as to how to comprehend the meaning and significance what is being represented, thus shaping the likely potential for the ethical consideration of sufferers (ibid: 217). The distinction between these two significations and subject-positions is asserted as one of whether witnesses are prompted to recognise the subjectivity of sufferers. To recognise a person's subjectivity in this context “is more than being aware of their existence, or curious about their circumstances, or able to see them, or saddened by the thought of their pain; it is an attunement to *their capacity* to suffer, the ascription of ethical urgency or significance to that suffering” (Adelman and Kozol, 2014, emphasis added). It is recognition that prompts “different ways of knowing and being” on the part of the witness (Kozol, 2014: 12).

But if recognition is an ethical act, it must also be acknowledged as an imagined one. As with the production of co-presence through news media, the recognition of subjectivity is “an imaginative process” prompted by the way the representation appears to address the witness (ibid: 149). After all, the thoughts and feelings of the sufferers are not articulated by the sufferer directly to the witness, nor are they transparently accessible; the production of imagined co-presence instead allows representations to

signify that those thoughts and feelings exist and have an ethical urgency on their own account. The imagining of that subjectivity, then, is constitutive of a particular 'ethical orientation'. This is conceptualised in the literature as an intersubjective process of recognition whereby the witness 'responds to' the sufferer – that is, the suffering is made meaningful as addressing the witness *to respond to* the sufferer (ibid: 90-1). The recognition of suffering's ethical import, then, echoes Butler's notion of recognisability in that it requires that representation signify a suffering subject as part of that representation of suffering.

The potential for recognisability, in terms of imagining sufferers' subjectivities, is shaped by whether a representation includes “markers of subjectivity” linked to the suffering bodies represented, or whether instead the representation of sufferers “severs subjectivity from the material body”, turning the body into an object of suffering rather than that of a subject (ibid: 149, 151). What counts as markers of subjectivity – as that which constitutes and indicates a human subject for witnesses – is itself shaped by the socio-cultural context within which a representation is produced and is “not necessarily tethered [essentially] to the material bodies” represented (ibid: 152). In the absence of those markers, representations produce suffering as an object insofar as that suffering signifies that it is meaningful primarily in terms of its *showing* to witnesses what that suffering looks like, in terms of *allowing* the experience of witnessing that suffering (Chouliaraki, 2009: 221-2).

Christina Konstantinidou demonstrates this process in her analysis of Greek newspaper coverage of suffering during the invasion and occupation of Iraq. One photograph of an Iraqi man wailing over the coffin of his son restricts the possibility for recognising that man's subjectivity firstly by narrowing the visual field to the man's body, occluding the place and people surrounding him which might otherwise give

context and meaning to the image beyond the *display* of that suffering. In the discursive context of cultural tropes of lamentation and practices of grieving, the emphasis on the man's pained facial expression and emblematic 'tragic', 'indiscreet' bodily gesture emphasises the man's suffering over any indication of his identity, his agency or the circumstances of this suffering. Finally, the gaze of the man is turned away from the camera's lens and towards his son's coffin; with the man making no eye-contact with the viewer as a result, his suffering is objectified as something to look at without visual confrontation from the signified subjectivity of the man himself (Konstantinidou, 2007: 153-5). In these ways, the representation of the wailing father is signified as meaningful in terms of displaying suffering, rather than representing a *subject* who *is* suffering. The singularity of the sufferer is effaced by a signification of his suffering as to be experienced for its own sake; the uniqueness and identity of the sufferer is rendered unimportant, since he merely allows for the aesthetic appreciation of his generalised suffering (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2010: 51-2). The subject-position produced as a result is one oriented towards "reflecting upon its own experience of 'watching itself seeing'" (Chouliaraki, 2009: 223). The representation of this man's suffering therefore regulates how witnesses are prompted to understand and respond to this suffering, curtailing recognisability in the process.

As Butler's earlier comments indicate, however, markers of subjectivity are not just shaped by the articulation of the suffering body. That body is articulated within a representation of war or of an act of state violence, such as counter-terrorism, and witnesses are prompted to incorporate this context into their understanding of the suffering. News coverage frames its amalgamation of text and images as a representation of suffering pertaining to a state's foreign policy, as a report on that policy's enactment (Konstantinidou, 2007: 153). If co-presence requires that the

representation signify its meaningfulness in terms of its trying to report on a real event (Frosh, 2009: 61), then co-presence in representations of state violence requires that the latter signify their meaningfulness in terms of reporting on a state's foreign policy. The question of ethical recognition in these cases is therefore related not just to the bodies of sufferers but implicitly to the state perpetrator of violence. Representations of suffering related to a state's foreign policy produce subject-positions in relation to both sufferers *and* perpetrators, making both identities meaningful through understandings of the war being perpetrated (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2010: 45-6). The articulation of suffering is shaped by this foreign policy framing, with suffering bodies ascribed meaning depending upon whether they signify that they are comprehensible through articulated narratives of war, whether they reflect metonymic identities within those rationalisations that position them in relation to the state. This is conceptualised in the literature as a representational practice where the signification of suffering echoes the terms that aim to rationalise the war.

Representations of Afghan citizens since 11 September 2001, for instance, have been produced in the context of the U.S. state's rationalisation of the war in Afghanistan as a liberal humanitarian project. This context gives particular meanings to the represented bodies: markers of female bodies' decontextualised social and economic precarity come to stand in for the country's structural collapse under the Taliban, while those bodies' Islamic dress echoes and so signifies the gendered oppression that is posited by the U.S.'s rationale for the war. These significations, in the absence of a wider articulated context, define Afghanistan as a racialised and gendered place of suffering relative to the presumed witness, with race and gender giving meaning to one another. This same representational practice effaces the subjectivities of the women depicted: their suffering is made meaningful as gendered vulnerability through markers of

racialised alterity, markers that literally obscure their faces and figuratively occlude their agency; this effacement-through-racialisation restricts the possibility of recognition for the presumed witness (Kozol, 2014: 74-7).

Within news media discourse detailing the U.S. state's "seemingly benign humanitarian logic" for the invasion of Afghanistan, civilian suffering more generally has been articulated as pivoting on brutal repression by the Taliban: restrictions on legal freedoms and religious conservatism are represented as having negated the population's agency, reducing civilians to helpless victims unable to lead politically-meaningful lives. This further restricts the possibility for recognisability even in cases of counter-insurgency casualties, since Afghan civilians are positioned in a narrative for war where they "could only be understood as *potential* humans... residing in a state of abeyance as they waited for the international community to restore to them the possibility of a liveable life" (T. Gregory, 2012: 337, emphasis in original). Ascribed meaning in this way, suffering is signified as reflecting the state's own terms for justifying the conflict, producing a subject-position from which women's liberation and democratic freedoms appear concomitant with the presumed witness' society, "a natural part of 'Western humanist values'" (Stabile and Kumar, 2005: 775).

Witnessing suffering is linked in the above conceptualisation to the rationalisation of war. Representations of suffering signify their comprehensibility within particular normative frameworks posited as the rationale for war. Within those frameworks, the articulation of suffering decouples that suffering from subjectivities, by foreclosing the possibility that sufferers could "could appear as politically qualified subjects possessing lives that could be comprehended as viable or meaningful" (T. Gregory, 2012: 336). This qualifies the notion of suffering being signified as a mere object of contemplation: that objectification or dehumanisation takes place *through*

narratives of war that produce bodies as lacking subjectivity. These examples demonstrate that subjectivities are decoupled from suffering bodies through the signification of those bodies as meaningful within categories of difference – race, sex and class. In order for the representation of female Afghan civilians to objectify their suffering, those represented bodies must signify that their appearance and behaviour – the lack of a visible face, the framed lack of agency – reflect a particular configuration of these categories which *precludes* recognition. Suffering can therefore be positioned at the centre of representations of state violence while appearing to reiterate the terms that rationalise ongoing violence, “explaining how [sufferers] appear to be so lose-able in the quest to liberate them” (ibid: 337). These representations, then, reiterate a redemptive narrative of U.S. state violence that relies upon the articulation of suffering while dehumanising those who suffer within that narrative, preventing a consideration of their capacity to suffer as a result of this redemptive violence.

The fact that the subject-positions produced by such representations may prompt sadness or even outrage at suffering demonstrate that such affects are not sufficient for recognising subjectivity. While Butler frames the importance of recognisability in terms of “why it is we might feel horror in the face of certain losses but indifference or even righteousness in light of others” (Butler, 2009: 41-2), others caution that there is no clear-cut connection between particular affects towards suffering and recognising subjectivity. Narratives of war can shape subject-positions of outrage at suffering but for very particular reasons that efface the role of state violence in perpetuating suffering. The objectification of suffering may be articulated such that it signifies that suffering as horrific on account of its de-contextualised aesthetic qualities, prompting an “analytical self-contemplation over the evils of warfare” disconnected from any scrutiny of that war (Chouliaraki, 2009: 223). The subject-position that Wendy

Kozol describes as recoiling from representations of suffering may act as an expression of horror at that suffering, but the recoil from such representations may prevent witnesses from acknowledging how those portrayals address them *as if* they held a certain social identity that corresponds to the narrative for war. By preventing such scrutiny, then, recoiling from suffering may inadvertently reiterate identities of the witness and sufferer that fit within the rationalisation of that war (Kozol, 2014: 155-8). Indeed, studies of British newspaper coverage of the Iraq war have found that (rare) representations of civilian suffering could be framed as horrifying or outrageous without signifying that the suffering posed a challenge to state claims about the rationalisation of the war (Parry, 2012: 182-3). For this reason, I maintain that the crucial contribution of this literature on war and representation is the consideration of how the representation of suffering can efface the subjectivities of those who suffer. It is the non-recognisability of these subjectivities which shapes subject-positions that rationalise war.

This thesis contributes to the literature on the representation of war and suffering, by examining representations that challenge the dynamics of recognisability outlined above. The presumption in the above analytic is that the imagining of the sufferer's subjectivity is more ethical than the objectification of her suffering. This is grounded in the idea that to have such an imagining is to acknowledge the ethical import of the experience of the sufferer, of her experience of suffering. The lack of an ethical response is consequently equated with dehumanisation, conceptualising the latter as always an unethical process of representation (Pick, 2011: 6). But the recognition of a human being's experience and thus their ethical significance is still “a narration imposed on affect”, a meaning that the witness is prompted to attach to her affective response to represented suffering (Kozol, 2014: 90). Indeed, the ascription of

suffering to any creature, human or non-human, is a precarious production of meaning, since there is no catalogue, outside of socio-culturally-framed discourses, of the appearances and behaviours that definitively denote the experience of suffering by a sentient being (Aaltola, 2012: 49-67). Nevertheless, critical scholars on the representation of suffering in war place an ethical weight on the ability of witnesses to recognise the existence and qualities of sufferers' subjectivities. In this sense, while feelings of outrage may be insufficient for recognition, the ability to have an affective response is considered necessary for recognisability. In making this assumption, these scholars mandate an articulation of suffering by sufferers, a meaningful 'presence-ing' of that suffering in representations, as grounds for recognising the ethical worth of sufferers (Abbas, 2010). Moreover, this analytic of recognisability empowers the affects of the witness in response to suffering as able to produce knowledge of others' subjectivities – that is, the feelings of the witness allow for the recognition, through imagining, of sufferers' experiences (Möller, 2009: 788).

Within this analytic, then, affective reactions to suffering are what produce 'ethical orientations' towards that suffering. But while these affective responses might be experienced by witnesses as a spontaneous reaction to the recognition of a sufferer's experience, and therefore be understood as an unproblematic reflection of a common humanity, the response of witnesses is shaped by wider public discourse in terms of what counts as a marker of subjectivity or not (Adelman and Kozol, 2014). This analytic frames recognition as a mere matter of its being allowed unimpeded or its being curtailed, rather than its being discursively produced through and reiterating ideas of what denotes subjectivity and to whom it can potentially belong. As a result, so long as ethical responsiveness is reduced to an imaginative response to subjectivity, there is always the conceptual risk of naturalising witnesses' affects and perpetuating

unquestioned a wider discourse which delimits the markers of subjectivity and the potential for an affective response to violence. Privileging the imagining of subjectivity in this way leaves unexplored the ethical valences of witnessing violence that does *not* produce recognisable suffering, that does not lead to representations of sufferers whose suffering a witness can identify through the socio-cultural mores which shape our affects.

Given this socio-cultural shaping of the potential for affect and thus understanding, this thesis questions the restriction of ethics in relation to representations of war, the restriction of ethical responsiveness, to the understandings that are produced by affects in response to *co-present* suffering. Why should co-presence with suffering be a precondition for ethical responsiveness? Such a precondition simply equates the affect-induced imagining of subjectivity with an ethical response to suffering and, by implication, state warfare. As a consequence, the *absence* of sufferers from representations of violent state foreign policy is equated with a lack of ethics, with a curtailment of the ability to respond ethically, on the grounds that without co-presence no recognition of subjectivities is possible. Indeed, absence is over-determined in this regard: while co-presence is not guaranteed to produce recognisability, since it could alternatively lead to the objectification of suffering, the absence of sufferers necessarily precludes an ethical response.

This thesis challenges the association between recognisability and ethical responsiveness by foregrounding representations of violent state foreign policy where sufferers are absent and all that remains are the non-bodily, non-human traces of state violence. These representations expand the range of representations of war that are commonly associated with absence. The literature on the representation of war has conceptualised the absence of suffering largely as a matter of the effacement of sufferers

through hegemonic normative frameworks produced by the state. Representations of war which do not presence suffering have been studied primarily in two contexts. The first is those which portray war through signifiers of the state technologies that enable it. This critical analysis of the public portrayal of war became influential in the aftermath of the Gulf War, with scholars pointing both to the intense media focus on the capabilities and technology of 'precision' military weaponry (Griffin and Lee, 1995; Philo and McLaughlin, 1995: 149-53) and to the ubiquity of images and video footage taken from the cameras attached to 'smart-bombs', which allow audiences to follow the trajectory of missiles as they close in on their target (Stam, 1992: 102-5; Franklin, 2000: 41-2). In either case, it is argued, the representation of war through markers of military technology prompts witnesses to view war through the lens of these technologies (figuratively and literally), a subject-position which objectifies the deployment of these weapons in acts of violence as an aesthetic display of their unbelievable high-tech capabilities. The second context within which the absence of suffering is normally studied is those representations which appear to sanitise war by refusing to show suffering bodies (Campbell, 2004). This critical analysis has most recently been applied to the invasion and occupation of Iraq, finding that U.S. and UK news media appeared reticent to show images of Iraqi casualties of coalition forces' violence (Silcock et al, 2008; Parry, 2012).

Within these research strands, the absence of sufferers is equated with their effacement, producing representations of 'war without casualties'. This thesis argues, however, that while representations of contemporary covert counter-terrorism similarly do not represent sufferers' bodies, they do not simply remove any markers of those sufferers and their suffering such that "dead enemies [lose] this very last strand of recognition: being represented" (Delori, 2014: 526), prompting witnesses to ignore

them. Rather, these mediations of covert state violence signify that sufferers are not co-present with witnesses when the latter adopt the subject-position offered. Within the spatial and temporal coordinates produced by these representations, sufferers are *signified as absent*. The thesis therefore argues that the subjectivities of these sufferers are not being 'effaced' in these representations. In the context of the reviewed literature, it is analytically unclear how the notion of effacement could be made meaningful here, since witnesses are being prompted to imagine the absence of sufferers rather than be discouraged from considering that absence. In this sense, that absence is made meaningful in these representations. Since sufferers are themselves made meaningful *as absent* in this sense, their suffering therefore cannot be produced as an object for aesthetic contemplation. Witnesses are prompted to be co-present with the aftermath, rather than the enactment, of state violence. Neither objectification nor sanitisation is taking place here; the absence of suffering in this case is instead a matter of the representation signifying that a covert operation has been and gone, leaving only non-bodily public traces in its wake.

Despite this absence, these representations of covert action traces nonetheless have the potential to shape more or less ethical responses to what they do *and do not* show. Ethics, far from being banished by the mere fact of bodily absence, is still a live question in relation to these representations and the interpellations they produce. Representations such as of the drone airfield in Chabelly discussed earlier are still being articulated within the context of contemporary counter-terrorist policy – that is, they signify that they are to be understood as part of the workings of that policy. For this reason, the thesis places these representation within the lineage of representations of war. Moreover, these representations signify that the relevant counter-terrorist policy involves the perpetration of state violence and the infliction of suffering: the text and

images used to make news stories about these policies include references to deadly state intentions, to violent actions, and to casualties that result. News coverage therefore signifies that these covert policies are meaningful as state actions likely to cause deaths and injuries. As such, the subject-positions from which these representations are comprehensible will include understandings of the state and its infliction of violence. These representations produce subject-positions in relation to both the state perpetrator of counter-terrorism violence and the casualties of that violence. In the course of theorising and analysing the roles that secrecy and public traces play in making these operations meaningful, this thesis therefore argues that the question of an ethical or unethical witnessing of these representations is still both a relevant question – the possibility for ethical witnessing is not *a priori* disproved – and an open one: what it means to ethically witness these representations is a matter for theorisation and empirical analysis.

In order to study how the signified absence of suffering shapes the meanings that are attached to that suffering – the representational dynamics of absence – this thesis turns away from an exclusive association between ethical witnessing and the recognition of subjectivities. Rather than ask, 'Is recognition possible here?', the relevant question is, 'How is meaning attached to absence in these representations?'. Just as witnesses are prompted to understand the co-presence of sufferers in particular ways, so it is that when the absence of suffering and of suffered bodies is signified to them, witnesses are prompted to understand that absence as meaningful from a particular interpretive position. For this reason, the first two chapters of the thesis will set about conceptualising representational dynamics produced by signified absences: how those absences are themselves produced, what shapes their meaning, and how they in turn frame the events to which they relate. The subsequent empirical chapters will examine

what meanings are attached to and produced by the absence of those rumoured or presumed to suffer as a result of covert counter-terrorism operations and the subject-positions that are shaped as a result. Those subject-positions will help provide an answer to the question of ethical witnessing in the case of contemporary covert action, not in terms of the imagining of suffering experience, but nonetheless in terms of the ethical orientations that Chouliaraki spoke of earlier: of what witnesses are prompted to think it is legitimate and fair to think, feel and do in response to these public traces of covert action, and through them towards these unseen operations, their state perpetrators and their casualties.

The hidden file: absence and the covert action archive

The narrowness with which absence is implicitly conceptualised in the literature on the representation of war is one shared with what appears at first to be a rather different field: International Relations research into the political dynamics of covert action. Despite their differences in predominant theoretical and methodological assumptions, both fields define their research positions towards absence in opposition to their positions towards presence. As a consequence, while the literature on war representations sees absence as negating ethical responsiveness, literature on covert action in international politics posits absence as an impediment to research. This relegation is something too that this thesis aims to question and rethink: far from restricting research, the absences related to covert operations and their impact on the international stage are part of the constitution of those operations and thus a productive area for analysis.

The problem of absence for IR research into covert action begins with the very

definition of these state operations. While any research into the role of covert action in international relations logically must begin by delineating the boundaries or criteria of these state activities, in order to determine the scope of inquiry, the intuitive problem is that such activities are not fully available for scrutiny in order to determine those criteria. One is left paradoxically trying to define a phenomenon that is barely visible. As Kaeten Mistry notes, the conceptualisation of covert action has been tied directly to the Cold War history of the uncovering of state activities that were being kept hidden from the public. While governments “slowly and sheepishly admitted to” certain activities and labelled them covert action, “scholars and former intelligence practitioners” were the ones left to offer criteria for that label's application in the public sphere. Indeed, the founding document of the CIA itself “deliberately avoided” reference to covert action, seemingly to allow for an inconspicuous covert action function in light of public opposition to a permanent peacetime intelligence agency (Mistry, 2013: 112, 113).

Most definitions of covert action in the scholarly literature keel to what might be called a functional-institutional definition largely based upon U.S. state practice, defining covert action by its purported function and the institutional delineations made by those carrying out such action. This has led to a conceptualisation of covert action based on plausible deniability: that covert operations are defined by their being state activities designed “to influence... conditions abroad” but where “it is intended that the role of [the government in question] will not be apparent or acknowledged publicly” (U.S. Code, 2013: § 3093 (e)). The clear justification for this conceptualisation is that the U.S. legal statute which defines covert operations this way has governed a sizeable proportion of the secret state activities that scholars propose to study (Scott, 2004: 322-5).

But such a delineation does not solve the issue of scope. A focus on plausible

deniability leaves unexplained how to define the means and ends of operations to be studied under this heading. It is unlikely that scholars would want all state activities designed to be plausibly deniable to fall into the covert action category. Intuitively, covert operations are not as 'passive' and observational as other 'intelligence activities', but rather involve an interventionist component (ibid: 323). That 'covert' is used within statutory definitions as an adverb further suggests that some state actions may be covert without qualifying as 'covert action' (A. Wall, 2011: 129). This latter point connects to institutional scope, which is also ambiguous: while the U.S. legal code indicates that a covert action could involve or be undertaken by any number of "departments, agencies or entities" of the U.S. government, it exempts "traditional diplomatic or military activities or routine support to such activities" (U.S. Code, 2013: § 3093 (a), 3093(e)). This raises the pertinent question of whether military activities outside official war theatres which meet the plausible deniability criterion – for instance, those recent counter-terrorism activities conducted by the expanded U.S. Special Operations Command but not acknowledged by the Pentagon – should be considered by analyses of covert action (Kibbe, 2007: 59-60). It is often unclear whether such covert operations count under the U.S. Code as 'covert action' or 'traditional military activities', due to uncertainty over who has command authority in each case and whether the operation is linked to definable 'ongoing' or 'anticipated' overt military action (ibid: 63; A. Wall, 2011: 132-6; N. Shah, 2014: 166-7).

In order to decide which means, ends and institutional affiliations are sufficient criteria for a state activity to count within a covert action study, scholars would first need to know which activities meet the one necessary criterion defined above: that they be designed and conducted with the intention that the state role remain neither apparent nor acknowledged, implicitly to a general public (as well as other state and

non-state actors). The problem is that such an intention may not be determinable. Firstly, the converse intention that the operation be apparent or acknowledged is not the same as the operation *actually* being apparent or acknowledged; scholars would therefore need to know that this *intention* was present even if the operation itself was neither apparent nor acknowledged in the public sphere, since if so the operation would not count as a covert action. Secondly, the intention for the state's role to be neither apparent nor acknowledged could nonetheless be foiled – an operation may become apparent or may be inadvertently acknowledged, despite the state's intention otherwise. Scholars would not necessarily be able to determine from the public evidence whether this intention was ever present in such a scenario. Thirdly, a state could intend to acknowledge an operation but simply not be asked about it; thus the role of the state may remain unapparent even if the state did not intend to hide its role (A. Wall, 2011: 130-1).

The dilemma outlined above is one produced by pinning the conceptualisation of covert action on a determination of the state's intentions. If scholars presume that covert actions are precisely those state actions where the link to the state in question is intended to be obscured somehow, it becomes difficult to know whether any apparent visible link is real, a misapprehension or actually part of this obscuration – that is, whether the public information or purported evidence of covert action is trustworthy (Scott, 2004: 326-8). This reflects the positioning of absence as a hindrance within IR research on covert operations. If one aims to study state actions that one presumes are designed to be partially *hidden* based on the *public* evidence of those actions, absence is implicitly posited as a real possibility and a potential barrier to that study.

Thus in the sub-field of IR most devoted to studying covert action, intelligence studies, individual covert actions have been analysed primarily to establish the decision-

making and foreign policy conduct of states. Precisely because of the perceived need to fill in the blanks around this conduct, the issue of evidence has been foremost in scholars' minds: important details of the planning, execution and political fallout of covert action are brought to light years or even decades after they took place, or (it is presumed) do not emerge at all. This has been seen to raise questions around the reliability of research into the frequency and success of covert action, the decision-making processes of state bureaucracies and the international consequences of operations (ibid: 325-8; Mistry, 2011: 247-9). Those studies which have emerged therefore largely try to establish the historical record using declassified state materials. One such study, of British covert action during the 1962-4 Yemeni civil war, bemoans the dearth of research into covert operations' political dynamics, arguing that intelligence studies' "subjective definitions" of covert action, in the context of such action being a "closed activity", "pose an inherent epistemological problem" (Jones, 2006: 718). That is, covertness makes it difficult to determine one's scope of inquiry and methods of analysis.

Beyond individual case-studies, covert action has only relatively recently been conceptualised for the purposes of incorporation into wider IR research agendas. The manner of this incorporation, however, implicitly posits the evidential absences produced by covertness as a barrier to research. This reinforces a conceptualisation of covert action which ultimately reifies the state's influence on the public sphere. In criticising the lack of IR interest in covert action nearly twenty years ago, Elizabeth Anderson frames this lack of attention as reflecting a "tendency to regard covert operations as being outside the realm of "regular" foreign policy", rather than as "an integral element in advancing the interests and foreign policy goals of a government, by employing secret means to accomplish that which cannot or should not be pursued

overtly” (Anderson, 1998: 403-4). By framing an IR research agenda towards covert action as the study of “a means of implementing foreign policy objectives”, however, Anderson limits analysis of covert action to analysis of the state's *implementation* of it, of its dynamics and effectiveness as a foreign policy tool, using “theoretical concepts” developed “to explain other *instruments*” of state policy-making (ibid: 404, emphasis added). More than a decade after Anderson's appeal, the incorporation of covert action into IR research as a foreign policy tool was still being advocated for in these terms. Richard Aldrich argues that the work of intelligence agencies has still not been fully conceptualised within IR scholarship, with interest largely reduced to “detailed study of the foreign policy machine” rather than to how intelligence work speaks to “broader debates in international relations” (Aldrich, 2011: 143, 144). Aldrich himself, however, conceptualises intelligence agencies' relevance in terms of the need to “understand the transformative impact” of changes in international relations “upon [their] own activities”, the “significant changes and challenges” those agencies face (ibid: 140, 141). To study covert action in IR, then, is a matter of examining how those state agencies can and do conduct operations in the wider world.

Within the area of IR research carved out for covert action, the covertness of these operations is therefore only significant insofar as it either shapes states' decisions to instigate those operations or affects their conduct and success. Thus one recent assessment of the “painfully short supply” of “systematic analysis” of covert intervention in IR frames a research agenda as determining the state's “rationale for preferring a covert intervention” to an overt one (Carson, 2016: 104, 108). Within this research programme, the secrecy of covert operations is considered important, but only as a “policy tool” to pursue states' foreign policy; applying IR theory to covert action is parsed as “theorising secrecy's appeal” to state leaders, the appeal of carrying out an

intervention covertly rather than overtly (ibid: 128).

In this sharply-prescribed research agenda, the same impasse emerges as that recognised in intelligence studies literature: if one aims to examine the implementation of states' covert foreign policy, one faces the problem of the absence of declassified or otherwise publicly-available primary sources detailing that implementation. Covertiness is framed as an analytical impediment. This likely reflects covert action's entrance into social scientific study through arguments in the 1980s over its importance in the history of the Cold War. The early academic literature on covert action argued that "archival data" and interviews with key participants could now establish covert operations as "significant link[s] in the ongoing chain of cold war history", rather than mere "background incident[s] in the escalating cold war" (Immerman, 1980/81: 629). Covert action was thus introduced as part of a debate over the political dynamics of the Cold War, resulting in a focus on establishing covert operations' existence and importance to these dynamics and to state geopolitical considerations, largely through empiricist research methods (Gaddis, 1989; Garhoff, 2004: 40-3).

This focus on states' implementation of covert action and an empiricist methodology seen to flow from this have together conceptualised covert action as a tool of foreign policy whose secrecy may well indicate something about state decision-making, but which nonetheless *obscures* the resultant roles covert action has played in shaping international relations. Methodologically, this encourages approaches that try to *get past* secrecy in order to analyse the secret state implementation of covert action and its traceable effects on world politics. Conceptually speaking, then, the existence of covert action is reduced to the state documentation that might establish its organisation and conduct. While more recent work in intelligence studies has moved beyond a narrow concern with declassifying government materials and has critiqued the previous

neglect of concern with methodology, questions of the latter are largely reduced to how one analyses declassified documents, and in particular how to control for the distorting influence of secrecy that both surrounds covert operations and frames the declassified state archives that detail them (eg. R. Hughes, 2008: 849-54). Covertiness remains something that stands in the way of analysis by producing absences in the public record. As Mistry argues, by focusing on that historical record and presuming that it can be filled in through state archives, studies of covert action have implicitly conceptualised “a 'hidden truth' that lurks inside a dusty box on some far-flung archival shelf” (Mistry, 2011: 267). Within this conceptualisation, the existence of covert action is constituted by the state's archives of its deliberations and actions. With those archives secreted by the state, the absences that are produced in the public sphere are distinguished from covert action – those absences are not thought of as shaping or co-constituting the existence of covert action but as merely obscuring that existence. Covert action is thus conceptually separated from the public sphere (see Carson, 2016: 109-11).

This thesis challenges the analytical focus on the hidden file, on the idea that covert action fundamentally exists in the classified state archives that would reveal both state intentions and the secret shaping of international politics by covert agents. Searching for the hidden file only reinforces a presumed connection between the political dynamics of covert operations and the intentions of the state, as if without knowledge of these intentions those dynamics are invisible and inaccessible – indeed, that those intentions are what determine those dynamics in the first place. That search also neglects the full implications of covertness, of its definition in terms of plausible deniability. While this official definition might appear to set up public absence as a barrier to accessing these operations, it also implies that a covert operation may have a public existence beyond state actions and articulations. In these legal definitions, to be

covert need not mean to be clandestine: for an operation to be clandestine, according to U.S. military doctrine, involves it being “sponsored or conducted by governmental departments or agencies in such a way as to assure secrecy or concealment”. Clandestine operations therefore differ from covert operations in that “emphasis is placed on concealment of the operation rather than on concealment of the identity of the sponsor” (U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2008: 91). The implication of this distinction is spelled out by the Senate Report which accompanied the 1991 amendment to the U.S. Code that statutorily defined covert action: “covert actions may involve activities which are *visible or public*, but the role of the United States in carrying out such activities is itself not apparent or acknowledged” (quoted in Radsan, 2009: 534, emphasis added).

Covert operations, then, may in fact broach the public sphere, being visible in ways that allow for plausible deniability but which nonetheless present these operations in venues beyond state archives. The response of the empiricist IR scholar might be that a covert operation would still be difficult to identify for study, since without the determination of a state sponsor it will remain entirely unclear what visible events are in fact state activities being conducted covertly. Furthermore, an operation “may be both covert and clandestine”, suggesting an operation where both the state sponsor's role *and* the operation itself are designed “to assure secrecy or concealment” (U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2008: 91). But even here, the official definitions suggest an unexplored avenue of research. A covert and clandestine operation may still leave traces of itself in the public sphere – for instance, an operation to sabotage a bridge may be clandestine “but the results are clearly not – the locals would know the bridge was damaged” (Gross, 2009: 13). This possibility speaks to a wider consequence: depending upon their characteristics and contextualisation by those who encounter them, such traces of covert and even clandestine action could imply an attempt at state secrecy, could

suggest their relation to an event that was covert, or alternatively they could prompt rumours or speculative claims to that effect. In other words, public traces of covert action could signify plausible deniability and thus could *produce* state secrecy in the public sphere.

A focus on the hidden file, then, would ignore the potential intersection of secrecy and publicity. Even if both the role of the state in prosecuting a covert action and the act itself were secreted, with neither being apparent or acknowledged, public traces of an operation can make secrecy recognisable *within* the public sphere, by articulating an act of secrecy or hints at its secret contents. The signification of state secrecy through an operation's traces will in turn produce that operation in public discourse, by representing that operation and its covertness through the claims and suggestions of those traces. The existence of covert operations will therefore include its public existence *through* representations of state secrecy. This conceptual argument is based upon the claim that covert action, like any state foreign policy act, is a product of representational practices. These representations are not just attempts to 'reflect' some secreted material reality that itself defines these operations. These representations *produce* the social reality of these operations, for the simple reason that the world these operations exist within is only accessible to human beings through social practices that make that world intelligible, giving the world and its objects materiality (Dunn, 2009: 426, 431). Far from precluding access to those operations, then, state secrecy can become part of their existence in the public sphere. Public claims regarding past or ongoing operations – which can be articulated through speech and through other non-textual means, such as images and material objects – constitute those secrets of which they speak, materialising those covert activities as comprehensible events in the world and fixing meaning to them.

The fact that this public existence of covert operations can result from traces left in their wake also demonstrates that covert operations are not the sole product of the intentions and actions of state actors, but rather of broader representational practices not limited to those actions, which together materialise and reiterate social reality above and beyond the presumed agency of those actors (Bialasiewicz et al, 2007: 406-8). Practices of assembling documentation of suspected traces may lead to representations whose significations of plausible deniability, as well as the means and ends of covert action, exceed any state intentions. These collations of traces left in the public sphere are just as much a part of the existence of covert action in the world as the state decisions and practices that instigate those operations. The scope of inquiry should therefore not be restricted to state decision-making; decisions to enact some statutory definition do not determine the existence of covert action in the world. The international political dynamics that covert actions shape or become a part of are a product of representations and social practices which make the world meaningful through claims of state secrecy, exceeding the instrumental aims of states in using covertness. The rationale for searching the state archive, namely to find the hidden truth of these operations, is therefore nullified: those representational practices which produce state secrecy and shape the political dynamics of covert action do so “not because of the inherent 'truth' of those representations, but because of the strength of that specific representational power” (Dunn, 2009: 426). This is a matter of studying not what the state might mean by its covertness but what that covertness does in the world, how it shapes public discourse and thus political dynamics.

But this does not make covert action the same as overt action for the purposes of analysis. The public existence of covert action will involve representations not just of secrets but of an act of secrecy, an attempt by the state to ensure its role is neither

apparent nor acknowledged. A research agenda based around the public existence of covert operations will consequently aim not to 'uncover' the secret of these operations. Rather, as Claire Birchall has recently put it, it will aim to "stay with the secret *as secret*", to examine how secrets "operat[e] within a particular delimitation of space, time, the visible, the sayable, the audible, and political experience" and so form part of public representations as a recognisable quality or characteristic of state operations (Birchall, 2014: 26, emphasis in original). Far from dodging the issue of dealing analytically with the state's hiding of its activities, this conception of covert action's existence through public discourse is an attempt to wrestle with the production of state secrecy as a public phenomenon, as will be elaborated upon in the following chapter. To attempt to study state practices which one already assumes are designed to remain hidden is to analyse the production of that state secrecy within public representations, its articulation as a characteristic of state practices that themselves exist through those representations.

This production of state secrecy through traces of covert action challenges the conceptual separation of covert operations and the public sphere, since it suggests instead that the articulation of covert action's secrecy goes hand-in-hand with the production of the public sphere – that the two co-create one another. The IR literature on covert action discussed earlier posits a sharp boundary between the public sphere and the state's covert activities; the latter happen out of the public eye and outwith public deliberation. In making this claim, the literature presumes that the public sphere is something that already exists prior to those people, objects and issues that either are or are not within it – that the public sphere is some objective realm that is then filled with things. Specifically, this presumption follows a classic liberal Republican model by equating the public sphere with deliberation, with an area of social life where state citizens collectively discuss issues and public opinion is formed. The public sphere

exists, then, to the degree that citizens are 'public-spirited' and able to engage one another in dialogue on neutral social terrain in order to determine public opinion on societal issues (see Adut, 2012: 239-42). This public-spiritness implies the creation of a public, of a collective that recognises itself as such through its deliberation for a common purpose. As covert action is enacted and operated outwith any channels of deliberation amongst this public, this literature argues that covert action remains outside the public sphere, except when public revelations allow operations to 'enter' already-existing channels of debate.

The problem with this conception is that the public sphere is not a given: it depends upon the discursive production of ideas over what it means for something to be public, how the 'publicness' of things is to be recognised. Such ideas are themselves shaped by people and objects which signify their claim to publicness, and equally those that signify acts of secrecy. This signified publicness is a particular kind of co-presence, in that it prompts witnesses to consider themselves as sharing a public sphere with these other things. This co-presence is shaped by representations which are sensorily accessible to witnesses and which signify that this sensory access is in principle available to others in the witness' society; moreover, represented people and objects will signify that they share a physical or virtual space with others, including the witness – that they are part of one space of accessibility (ibid: 243). It is this in-principle generalised sensory accessibility that signifies publicness and thus materialises the public sphere where things share this quality. This publicness involves the signification of a public, defined not through collective deliberation but through the publicity of representations. Publicity involves representations being given attention by a collective that may be comprised of strangers but which, through acts of witnessing, recognises itself as sharing in this giving of attention – disparate newsreaders being one example (ibid:

244-5).

The signification of publicness is not neutral, however, but attaches particular meanings to the public sphere. The social practices and relations of people and objects – for instance, the action of carrying out normally-'private' activities in a public space, or a journalist entering a private home after a special forces operation and reporting from it live on television – are able to shape and re-shape others' understandings of the social spaces that they share or do not share, “creat[ing] for others a *sense* of place or out-of-placeness” (Walters and D'Aoust, 2015: 56, emphasis in original). The appearances and behaviours of these people and objects can be signified as appropriate or inappropriate within the public sphere, thus producing that public sphere through ideas of what it means to inhabit it. The journalist entering the ransacked home might behave in a way that signifies her wandering through a space that it once would be inappropriate to enter and broadcast from but is now newsworthy and so public in a conditional sense. In this sense, ideas associated with the public sphere can be shaped by the publicity of representations, by their prompting collective attention through their appearance in news coverage. The public sphere, then, is one that constantly shifts its boundaries and norms of practice through representational practices which signify publicness or otherwise.

This 'or otherwise' is where secrecy becomes important. Public traces of covert operations which prompt a particular kind of co-presence with witnesses help produce the public sphere in relation to the secrecy that they signify. By producing secrecy, these traces gain meaning as being 'out-of-place' in the sense of having entered the public sphere of general accessibility as a result of people, objects and political mechanisms that remain outside the public sphere, that are not sensorily-accessible. Their documentation and contextualisation within news coverage allows these traces to

signify their meaning through things that remain secreted; these traces thus produce ideas of the *limits* of the public sphere, of that which is not not within it but which instead lies in other less accessible spheres, namely certain covert state activities. Furthermore, the representation of these traces shapes what it means to inhabit the public sphere by signifying their precarious position within that sphere, their being incidental remainders of covert events that may just as easily not have become publicly-accessible in the sense discussed above. Traces in turn signify a blurred boundary between the public sphere and the covert realm, by indicating that covert operations may well have occurred in the public sphere but went either unseen or undocumented, with covert agents having now left the public sphere. Far from producing an impassable divide between the public sphere and covert operations, state secrecy discursively produces both in relation to one another and suggests their intersection, and is able to do so through representations of covert action traces.

To reduce covert operations to the hidden state archive is therefore to ignore how covert action, through its public traces, can help shape understandings of the public sphere. Furthermore, those traces may produce absences within that sphere. When contextualised within news coverage, those traces are able to signify public absences related to the unseen covert event – not just the absence of documentation of the event itself but the absence of representational markers of people and objects involved in that event. These significations can include the absence of suffering bodies, as discussed in the previous section. Once produced by public traces, these absences can interact with other elements of a news representation, those other traces seen to have been left behind in the public sphere. As such, absences can shape the meaning of covert operations – indeed, being part of these operations' public representation, absences are part of the public existence of covert action. Absence is therefore not something that IR

scholars should shy away from; nor should scholars necessarily attempt to eliminate them or deactivate their signifying power for fear of their 'contaminating' research results.

In approaching the study of covert counter-terrorism, this thesis resists the temptation to 'fill in' absences in the public record of contemporary operations. Rather, it tries to examine what these absences do in public discourse, how they help configure the meanings that are attached to covert operations in representations of the rumours and debris they leave behind. In doing so, the thesis demonstrates that when absences are materialised and made meaningful through public representational practices, they do not remain empty or opaque. In fact, absences in the traces of covert counter-terrorism are produced in ways that give them representational content, that allow them to signify meanings of their own in concert with the rest of a representation. Specifically, through their framing by state secrecy, these absences become meaningful in terms of suggestive but equivocal ideas that they signify about these unseen events. These allusions from absence are conceptualised in chapter two as intimations from the residue of covert violence. This thesis therefore begins by acknowledging not just the intersection of secrecy and publicity, but the intersection of presence and absence, and the potential for both intersections to influence one another. Covert counter-terrorism exists, then, not in the hidden file of a state archive, but in public discursive dynamics that form between secrecy and absence.

Beyond the 'rationalisation' of state violence

Once covert operations exist not solely through state rationalities and operating procedures but through representations of their traces in the public sphere, their

political dynamics become more complicated than suggested either by the war representation literature or by those focused on the covert action archive. The ability of representations to signify the absence of suffering bodies, rather than simply efface the subjectivities of counter-terrorism casualties, decouples ethical witnessing from the notion of 'recognition' by raising the possibility of other as-yet-unanalysed subject-positions towards casualties and the state. In addition, the possibility that secrecy and absence might be signified by the remainders of covert action – those rumours, speculation and debris left in its wake – suggests that the meanings attached to covert counter-terrorism are not necessarily dependent on how the state frames its own activities. The state need not address itself to the public which witnesses these representations; indeed, if these operations are intended to be covert, then state officials may deliberately avoid acknowledging public discourse surrounding such operations. Yet state secrecy, covert operations and absences in their public traces may still be produced in the public sphere and shape the meaningfulness of these unseen practices. The paradox present in Butler's and Krongard's statements on the representation of war is elaborated by these public traces. The crucial question therefore is, what would it take for these representations to legitimise or rationalise these operations? And pressing further, what exactly would legitimisation mean in this context?

Scholarship on contemporary counter-terrorism and foreign policy violence more generally contains a widespread assumption about legitimisation. In order for representations of counter-terrorism to reiterate terms that rationalise these policies – for them to shape legitimising subject-positions – those terms of rationalisation must themselves be articulated in public discourse and *pre-empt* understandings of state violence and suffering, so that representations of the latter prompt witnesses to *recall* those terms and to see them echoed in these portrayals. For representations of veiled

Afghan women to legitimise U.S. intervention on the grounds of liberation, veiling must be associated in public discourse with racialised ideas of sexual oppression, such that the image reiterates those ideas and appears to address the reader or viewer as if she held a contrasting configuration of identity. Laura Shepherd summarises this pre-emption as a process of “the dissemination of specific interpretations of representational practices”, primarily in the form of state narratives for its foreign policy actions, which rely on the “implied authority” of representations as reflecting those actions in order to try to fix the meaning associated with these practices (Shepherd, 2008: 214). Analysing public images of Presidential authority and the legitimacy of U.S. power at Guantánamo Bay, Shepherd argues that the state narratives which accompanied these images, and counter-narratives from human rights organisations, attempted to “render the images decipherable, meaningful, and thus to fix the viewer(s) of the images in a specific relationship to the images themselves – as interpreter of a *predetermined* visual terrain” (ibid: 218, emphasis added). Elspeth Van Veeren characterises this process as one of “creat[ing] and maintain[ing] an ‘interpretive frame’ that privilege[s] a reading” of counter-terrorism practices as “essential in the fight against terrorism”. This pre-conditioning of public discourse “generate[s] support” for counter-terrorism by shaping how representations of these practices are understood as intelligible, by trying to pre-determine the meanings that ‘make sense’ of these public portrayals (Van Veeren, 2011: 1724, 1725).

This predetermination of meaning is crucial: narratives of the rationale for state violence must prompt witnesses to find violence and suffering comprehensible in particular ways, to understand *what* those representations signify and what political context they relate to, in order for that violence to reiterate the very terms that are shaping the meaning of that violence for witnesses. As Rancière argues, in order for

representations to produce particular subject-positions towards violence and suffering, their meaning must be pre-empted such that witnesses are prompted to understand those representations as addressing and positioning them in a particular way; witnesses must “already be convinced” about what is being represented and their own relation to it (Rancière, 2009: 85). This pre-conditioning of public discourse surrounding state violence is premised upon representations of that violence either echoing wider discourses that are already circulating, or articulating their own narrative for, and thus contextualising, what they represent.

This pre-conditioning points to something both Campbell (2007) and Rose (2009) have termed the visual economy of representations, the idea that the discursive production of the world through representational practices is a matter “of what images do in circulation rather than just an interpretation of their iconography”, how representations are “imbricated” within particular “social spaces, affects, cultural histories and political contexts” (Campbell, 2007: 361). If the concept of images is expanded here to refer to visual and textual representational practices – since the two often work in concert to produce the world as meaningful – then this economy of representations can be understood as being part of the materialisation of the public sphere discussed above, the production of what appears sensorily-accessible to co-present witnesses. It is through practices of producing and contextualising images within particular discourses of meaning – for instance, framing a satellite photograph of an airfield in Djibouti within a discussion of ongoing U.S. covert activities in the Horn of Africa – that social reality is made intelligible. The idea of pre-conditioning is that the economy of counter-terrorism representations is largely determined by the state actor in question, with state rationalisations setting the terms for how representations are to be understood.

The critical literature on counter-terrorism therefore analyses the meanings attached to these state practices as a product of state political actors who frame textual and visual images of these practices; these actors articulate narratives of state policies and address those narratives to the public, pre-conditioning a subject-position towards images of those policies. This analytical dynamic has recently led Clive Barnett to caution that the standard critical understanding of security politics, including of counter-terrorism, too often presumes that citizens will always adopt subject-positions as a result of, or be interpellated by, state discourses surrounding security policies. These works make “deductions about [the] subject formation” of citizens from the “governing rationalities and programmes of rule”, taking the latter as “strongly constitutive of the entire social field” of public discourse (Barnett, 2015: 264). The presumption that state discourses aim at “spreading fear and circulating anxieties among whole populations through public means” snowballs into a conception of the public sphere as “a surface in which powerful actors effectively manipulate the dispositions and feelings of whole populations”, with those discourses inevitably mobilising citizens for securitising aims (ibid: 261, 259). At the same time, those discourses are thought to mask their meaning-making power “by working through registers that resist explicit recognition or reflection by subject populations”; this conception posits state discourses as successfully circumventing possibilities for public action and deliberation around security policies in any way contrary to these discourses' intended meanings (ibid: 262, 260).

In this understanding of counter-terrorism practices, the public sphere is conceptualised as a pre-existing medium for security actors to manipulate thoughts and affects in line with discourses that are insidiously *always-already* hegemonic in public life. The pre-conditioning of public discourse discussed above is therefore taken to

wholly or predominantly shape the meaning of counter-terrorism. This analytic constructs subject-formation, the issue of what subject-positions witnesses adopt in relation to counter-terrorism, as a matter of assent or dissent towards state discourses. Through contextualising narratives of its actions, the state *addresses* its counter-terrorism policies *to* the public, by offering a particular understanding of represented foreign policy practices that the public can then accept or reject. The question of legitimisation, of witnesses contributing to the rationalisation of state violence, is therefore framed as one of *responding to an address* by the state. This gives an extra political weight to the recognisability of suffering subjectivities discussed earlier. Recognition is now framed as one side of a binary of possible responses to state discourses, namely the side of dissent from a state rationalisation of its policies. On the other side is “complicit[y]” (Shepherd, 2008: 214), an understanding of state violence within the frame of state narratives for its actions.

This analytic of the public discourse that constitutes counter-terrorism is reflected in discussions of resistance, of opposition to or the challenging of state rationalisations of violence. Resistance is often used as shorthand in an implicit reference to the dominance of state rationalisations of its counter-terrorism. For instance, in critiquing scholarship which perpetuates an opposition between the 'appearance' and 'reality' of counter-terrorism, David Campbell centres the “critical challenge” of “think[ing] how resistance would be possible and what resistance would look like” if this material-discourse binary were replaced with an understanding of the world as intelligible only through representations (Campbell, 2008: 542). This is a challenge because within such a conceptualisation, state discourses could not simply be contested by offering supposedly 'undistorted' portrayals of state actions that would reveal the former's illusory nature. Campbell argues that “[t]he question of resistance” in

this framework therefore depends upon (referencing Debord) “how comprehensive the power of the spectacle is understood to be” – that is, how much public discourse is thought to have been pre-determined such that representations appear meaningful within only one hegemonic framing. Campbell asks whether critical scholars are to think of that control of public discourse as “absolute” or merely “dominant in social life” (ibid: 546). In the context of the literature on the representation of war, the answer to this question pivots on whether the state's pre-conditioning of representations curtails any recognition of sufferers' subjectivities. Resistance would depend upon the possibility for a subject-position that recognises these subjectivities and which through this recognition rejects the state's rationalisation of its violence. The rationale for using the term resistance is that it is a subject-position *in response* to representational practices determined by hegemonic discourse, a subject-position that *contests* the meanings attached to social reality by that discourse.

As already noted, recognisability is frequently conceptualised as a matter of the affective response of witnesses to representations of violence. Recognising the subjective experience of suffering and its moral significance is predicated upon being affected by that suffering, upon being prompted to interpret one's affect as a response to suffering. For this reason, the question of resistance is frequently answered in terms of having different kinds of affects to those prompted by state rationalisations for its counter-terrorism. It is therefore thought that having a particular affect is necessary to disrupt the meaning-making involved in state rationalisations. This is described in the literature on representations of suffering in counter-terrorism as a matter of shaking the public out of their apathy and indifference: “War sustains its practices through acting on the senses, *crafting them* to apprehend the world selectively, *deadening affect* in response to certain images and sounds... disposing us to feel shock and outrage in the

face of one expression of violence *and righteous coldness* in the face of another” (Butler, 2009: 51-2, emphases added). To use the language of Chouliaraki cited earlier, this shaping of understandings and affects produces certain ethical orientations which indicate how one should legitimately respond to violence and suffering. To talk of pre-conditioning is to presume that an ethical orientation towards a representation has been produced by hegemonic discourse, leaving the witness to either unthinkingly accept that orientation or to challenge it by recognising the experience of sufferers as morally significant.

The challenge posed by representations of contemporary covert counter-terrorism is that they do not appear to be pre-conditioned in the manner theorised by the above literature – their meanings are not being predetermined by state articulations. The economies of representation within which news coverage exists and circulates are a product of journalists' documentation and assemblage of traces of covert activities that have been left in the public sphere. And as the thesis will demonstrate, while the U.S. state does articulate rationalisations in the abstract for continuing counter-terrorist violence, it rarely addresses these traces and the specific activities they suggest, nor does it articulate its apparent *secrecy* and a rationale for its use to the public. It is not at all clear, therefore, that the ethical orientations produced by these traces of covert violence will be consistent with some pre-emptive hegemonic discourse. The argument of this thesis is that if contemporary covert counter-terrorism is being discursively produced not through the operating procedures and political rationalities of the U.S. state but through rumours and debris left behind, and if those are not contextualised by the state, it is unlikely that counter-terrorism is crafting understandings and affects in accordance with some state rationalisation of its practices. These public traces of covert violence are signifying their own forms of secrecy and absence which are reshaping the existence of

the public sphere, of its extent and qualities; there is no *a priori* reason why these traces should do this in line with the state's rationalisation for its violence if such a rationalisation is not pre-conditioning public discourse around these traces.

In analysing the representational dynamics of these traces of covert action, the ways they are collated and contextualised in news coverage and the secrecies and absences that are produced as a result, this thesis examines the potential for subject-positions towards counter-terrorism that go beyond this concept of legitimisation. When approaching the residue of covert action, a binary of assent-dissent, or one of legitimisation-resistance, is inadequate for conceptualising potential subject-positions. The covert counter-terrorism practices discussed in this thesis are not being articulated within state rationalisations of counter-terrorism policies. They are being represented through collations of their various public traces which are not addressed by the state, allowing those traces to make these practices meaningful in ways that do not reflect any state rationalisation. State discourses are not being legitimised or resisted in the subject-positions produced here.

The question then becomes, what would count as ethical responsiveness in this context? What does ethical responsiveness rest upon? As already argued, non-bodily traces of covert action prompt the need to decouple ethical responsiveness from the idea of recognisability, the potential to recognise the subjectivities of sufferers. The production and circulation of public traces within news coverage similarly challenges the utility of the concept of legitimisation and its counterpart resistance. Yet as already noted, the subject-positions produced by representations of these traces are nonetheless positioned in relation to both casualties and the state perpetrators of counter-terrorism violence. This thesis therefore explores how ethical responsiveness towards the residue of covert counter-terrorism should be conceptualised, what kinds of subject-positions

are possible from this residue and how they position witnesses relative to the state and casualties. If witnessing here is not about accepting or dissenting from state rationalisations, it nonetheless rests on understandings of the meaning and significance of unseen covert violence based on its public traces. The thesis examines how resultant subject-positions can be conceptualised based upon the ethical orientations towards covert violence that are invested in them.

Lynching and histories of violence

In order to conceptualise the stakes of ethical witnessing beyond rationalisation, the thesis proposes an historical affiliation for this covert action, based on its representation through non-bodily residue and the absences that this produces in the public sphere. The historical lineage of contemporary covert counter-terrorism has thus far been premised upon its operationalisation, the state's implementation of this violence. This focus has connected these practices to various programmes of pacification and policing of colonised populations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and to Cold War counterinsurgency. The concept of 'targeted killing', applied to drone strikes and special forces operations, has been connected to twentieth century European colonial practices of assassinating insurgent leaders and demoralising sympathetic populations through persistent bombing, from the British in Pakistan to the French in Algeria (Kilcullen and Exum, 2009; Moyn, 2013: 229-30; Chamayou, 2015: 60-72). Persistent surveillance and gathering of information on 'suspect' populations has similarly been linked to the surveillance and policing of European colonies from the air, tactics designed in concert with bombing to shape more compliant populations (Neocleous, 2013; Satia, 2014). Beyond past colonial practices, the contemporary practice of constructing 'kill lists' of potential targets has been traced to previous CIA

intelligence-gathering efforts in support of counterinsurgency targeted killings, most notably the Phoenix Program during the Vietnam War (Tovy, 2009; Shaw, 2016), and to perceptions of the strategic 'success' of Israel's policy of assassinating Palestinian political leaders (S. Graham, 2011: 140-3; Gunneflo, 2016).

By focusing on continuities in the *implementation* of state violence, and in the political rationalities behind that implementation, this construction of an historical lineage rarely addresses the public existence of secrecy and absence that accompanies contemporary counter-terrorism operations. This lineage instead attempts to get past that secrecy and absence, to reveal the hidden state mechanisms of demonisation and dehumanisation. As with the previous-discussed literature on covert action, these works implicitly position secrecy as a barrier to analysing these state activities. To be clear, this thesis does not dismiss historical parallels and links with colonial policing and counter-insurgency, but rather asks what historical affiliations might be suggested if the rationalisation of covert counter-terrorism was not taken as a given, if instead we were to stick with the public existence of these operations *as secret*, and examine the significations made by the public traces and absences of these activities. For these significations have the potential to withhold or circumvent legitimisation, and as such, the existence of these covert operations is not wholly captured in the political rationalities studied by the above literature. The traces of absence around these operations suggest different historical connections.

Based on the public traces and absences of covert counter-terrorism, the thesis posits a representational parallel with lynching practice in the United States, specifically public representations of that practice from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries. This parallel is theorised as an 'historical affiliation', a representational association between historical forms of violence with vastly different motives and

mechanisms, an association that can be used to analyse obscured representational dynamics shared by both. The aim of this affiliation with lynching is to assess the potential for subject-positions that go beyond the rationalisation of violence. Through this assessment, historical affiliation is designed to provide an answer to the question of what ethical witnessing could involve in the case of covert counter-terrorism's residue.

In order to detail this methodology and its utility, some preliminary explanation is needed. Lynching – broadly an extra/quasi-legal form of vigilante violence against social minorities by those with systemic power (Belew, 2014: 85-6, 92; J. Carr, 2016) – went through a number of phases, with recent scholarship tracing its roots to the decades before the American Civil War, and the tense entanglement of extralegal mob violence with a fledgling criminal justice system in frontier regions (Pfeifer, 2013). Today, however, the practice has become defined by the wave of public spectacle lynchings in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly against African Americans in the South. Scholarship has until recently echoed this focus and definition (Brundage, 2005: 405; Belew, 2014: 84-5). These were highly ritualised acts of violence, where crowds of dozens to hundreds of people would watch the humiliation, torture, death and/or dismemberment of victims, often involving hanging, performed and legitimised as criminal punishment (Fuoss, 1999; Garland, 2005). These lynchings' conscious enactment as public spectacle has shaped analysis of their representational power. To witness and 'make sense' of this performance either directly or through photography, scholarship has concluded, was to understand it as a demonstration of black deviance being put in its place, and thus to be interpellated into an opposing racialised collective, to feel part of a united and superior white citizenry transcending class divisions (Hale, 1998; Nevels, 2007; Wood, 2009).

Two problems have been identified with this long-lasting focus on the spectacle

lynching, which help explain the use of lynching in this thesis. Firstly, this focus neglects the wide variety in lynching practice across time and geography. Lynching existed throughout the United States, developing different characteristics and victims over time in the South, the West and the North; variances were often linked to regional criminal justice systems that institutionalised lynching's terroristic function (Barrow, 2006; Gonzales-Day, 2006; Belew, 2014: 86-92; Pfeifer, 2014: 835-7, 842-3). Spectacle lynchings were part of only one phase of the practice, from roughly 1880 to 1930 (Belew, 2014: 84). As W. Fitzhugh Brundage identifies in the cases of Georgia and Virginia over this period, lynchings took four broad forms, differing in size, motivation and intersection with the law (Brundage, 1993: 18-19). While mass mob lynchings were a common form from the 1900s to 1930, smaller terrorist lynchings defending 'moral propriety' or economic interests (eg. late-night 'Klu-Kluxers') were not unheard of (ibid: 19-28). Private secretive mobs punishing alleged criminal offences were the dominant form of lynching in the 1880s and remained significant throughout the 1890s to 1920s (accounting for the majority of Virginia lynchings from 1990 to 1920), regaining dominance in subsequent decades as lynching declined overall (ibid: 28-33). Both terrorist and private lynchings enjoyed varying, often ambiguous communal support, their legitimacy tested by the tensions they created among communities over their fit with prevailing values.

Secondly, this focus on the spectacle lynching has emphasised and elasticated the lynching perpetrator's intent and perspective in order to judge communal sympathies for such violence. Lynching's performative and ritualistic qualities have been theorised as interpellating local and regional white supremacist-based support, paralleling perpetrators' own understandings (Wood, 2009: 19-44). The above context demonstrates, however, that such sympathies cannot be assumed: as Brundage notes of

the small secretive events that comprised half of all lynchings in Georgia and Virginia, whatever communal sentiments these mobs thought their actions reflected, such covert lynchings “could not, in any meaningful way, serve as *vehicles to reaffirm* widely held social values”, being conducted out of the public eye (Brundage, 1993: 32, emphasis added). Such lynchings forswore the ritualistic and 'performance' elements of their public spectacle counterpart, elements whose witnessing lent lynchings credence as enactments of social justice, distinguishing them for witnesses from unseen covert vigilantism (Wood, 2009: 43). Without those elements, it cannot be assumed that these acts of violence prompted witnesses to legitimise them: not directly, because there were often no witnesses present; and not indirectly, because public documentation or rationalisation by the perpetrators after-the-fact was lacking, replaced with more ambivalent reactions claiming to speak for 'the community'. As Bruce Baker notes, the mediated witnessing of lynching should not be analysed from the crude presumption that spectacle lynchings saturated the national media environment; nor should the social influence of speculative knowledge of more secretive lynchings be overlooked (Baker, 2004). Acknowledging the contingency of mediated witnessing here means acknowledging “how varied and complex were the debates about lynching at the turn of the nineteenth century”, with public discourse encompassing those who saw themselves as looking at lynching practice and culture from the outside; they may not necessarily have been prompted to identify with lynching's perpetrators (Goldsby, 2006: 20).

These two issues with lynching scholarship's focus on mass mob violence raise the question of lynching's representational power, of how that power operated in the public sphere, beyond the spectating crowds of the public lynching. As the above discussion indicates, this speaks to the possibility of representational dynamics that exceeded a binary of assent and dissent towards lynching, echoing this Introduction's

argument regarding research on war, covert action and media representations. As subsequent chapters detail, this question of lynching's public resonance has prompted recent research on national representations of the practice in the United States, analysing first how lynching was made comprehensible for populations outside those local communities who were much more likely to witness them first-hand; and second, how public discourse shaped particular ethical orientations towards a practice which was often conducted in secret, and whose enactment was not performed or documented for the wider populace. How did the covertness of so many lynchings shape national discourse around the practice? And what was the significance of the public absence of any spectacle in relation to these lynchings, of any documentation of the violence and the violated bodies at their centre?

In addressing these aspects of lynching practice, recent scholarship has demonstrated that lynching was not solely represented in public discourse as a spectacle of white supremacy, and did not need to gain social significance as such a spectacle to nonetheless prompt understandings and affects that unwittingly allowed the practice to persist, above and beyond perpetrators' rationales (*ibid*). The complex representational dynamics of lynching in national discourse, and the roles of secrecy and absence in those dynamics, suggest representational connections with contemporary covert action as a basis for analysing the latter. As subsequent chapters will argue, dynamics of absence in national portrayals of lynching link the practice to representations of covert counter-terrorism that include similar absences, of documented violence and violated bodies. With that link established, recent research on lynching's representational dynamics can be used to elucidate the possibility of similar dynamics in public discourse around drone strikes, kill/capture operations and manhunts, dynamics that may be more obscured in the latter case but which this affiliation can highlight. These dynamics

in the public life of lynching speak not to assent or dissent, but to the possibility of more complicated subject-positions; in this way, lynching scholarship can expand our understanding of what it might mean to ethically witness covert warfare.

The linking of violence from different times and places on the basis of representational similarities, and the use of that link to analyse inconspicuous representational dynamics, is conceptualised here as a method of historical affiliation. In formulating this method, the thesis draws on the work of and on the prose writer W.G. Sebald. Over the past fifteen years, interpretive scholarship in International Relations has increasingly examined how representational practices outside the realm of 'high politics', from art to popular culture, shape the political world. This scholarship has also asked how international politics can be examined with reference to the full range of human sensory and imaginative faculties (Bleiker, 2001). Beyond examining artworks, then, this line of research has explored how aesthetic objects and practices, and our sensory encounters with them, can contribute to interpretive theory, method and analysis, how they can broaden "our interpretative repertoire" and shape a new "model of thought" interweaving "discordant faculties" (ibid: 519). Yet as Cerwyn Moore and Laura Shepherd have noted, this research agenda has failed to fully engage with long-standing work in aesthetics and literary theory that examines strategies of interpretation embodied in artworks and acknowledges the multiplicity of meaning to be derived from them, depending on how they are contextualised (Moore and Shepherd, 2010: 302-5). Moore and Shepherd call for IR research to re-engage "interdisciplinary approaches" in order to derive "radical accounts of meaning linked to aesthetics" (ibid: 304). Such radical accounts include "intuitive and imaginary accounts of epistemology", forged through attention to how artworks can imaginatively engage those who encounter them (ibid: 308).

This thesis embraces the call for IR to explore how cultural artefacts, through their prompting imaginative engagement, offer new ways of reading the international. The thesis uses the prose fiction of W.G. Sebald, and analysis of his work in literary studies, to formulate a qualitative method of analysing representations of unseen violence; this method derives from what scholarship points to as imaginative reading practices produced by Sebald's narratives. Sebald's fictional narratives propose, by example, that seemingly disparate and dissimilar forms of violence can nonetheless be understood on the basis of shared qualities in their public remainders, in what the violence leaves behind in the public sphere. These narratives centre on solitary wandering characters preoccupied with violent past events, both personal and historic, and their imprint on contemporary landscapes and memories: from ruins of natural and human destruction, to unclear and ambiguous accounts of history, to suppressed mental images and dreams of trauma. It is generally accepted that these digressive narratives are concerned with the irretrievability of the violent past, the inability to know and understand what has happened, and the effect of the past on the present through that very opacity. Throughout their travels, Sebald's narrators restlessly repeat their own or others' stories, living and dead, and gather up documentation of the violence of the past; but this gathering and repetition fails to make events any more comprehensible, or to reveal what the past was really like for those who lived it (Kochhar-Lindgren, 2002: 377). As the narrator of *The Rings of Saturn*, the prose work which this thesis draws on, puts it:

Whenever a shift in our spiritual life occurs and fragments such as these surface, we believe we can remember. But in reality, of course, memory fails us. Too many buildings have fallen down, too much rubble has been heaped up, the moraines and deposits are insuperable. (Sebald, 2002: 177)

In this sense, "Sebald's central subject" is the question of how to "[remain]

faithful to an irrecoverable past” through the nonetheless “hopeless' endeavour” of “representation” (Ceuppens, 2004: 191-2). As the above quote indicates, Sebald connects the irretrievability of the past with natural decay and human material destruction over time, with fallen buildings and ever-piling rubble. Yet his narratives' focus on such traces of past events suggests that there is worth to sifting through this rubble. Despite the seemingly aimless wandering within Sebald's narratives – characters frequently get lost, digress from their intended route, or are unable to explain why they are drawn to places (Long, 2011) – these accumulated, often chance, encounters with physical remains or clouded memories slowly offer an awareness of how past violence impacts on present environments and social relations. Such encounters allow characters to discern hidden histories of violence embodied in objects, landscapes and people, even if those histories remain opaque; they allow for a “fragile and fleeting... surfacing of what resembles the truth about the past *and its repetition in other forms* in the present” (Arnds, 2010: 341, emphasis added). The revelation here is not of the details and experiences buried in the past, but of the lost past's imprints on the present.

One aspect of this repetition in other forms, indicated throughout Sebald's narratives, is the mutual echoing of disparate forms of violence through their remains. In randomly encountering traces of violence, Sebald's narrators either consciously or inadvertently highlight representational similarities in acts of violence that could not appear more different in their motivations and mechanisms. In the course of their travels, narrators frequently detail myriad connections between places and events that are not immediately obvious in the present context. Barbara Hui likens Sebald's narrative strategy to the geographer Doreen Massey's concept of place, which defines the local as “a social dynamic entity that owes its particularity to its location in a larger global network of places”; Sebald thereby writes “local histor[ies] that [are] global in

scope”, with narratives jumping from characters' situations to many other times and places (Hui, 2010: 279, 283).

But in making such global connections, these narratives register the limits of rationalist approaches to history, represented by the irrecoverability of the past. Sebald's narrators often cannot explain why local people and places remind them of other events and times which they nonetheless go on to detail. These narrative transitions of apparent randomness and digression are acts of “sewing” together “ruptures between seemingly disintegrative elements” and exploiting latent coincidences and parallels revealed through them (Gray, 2009: 44). In this way, the “aimless wandering” of Sebald's characters is narrated as “dissolving the linearity of time”, as revealing different traces of violence in the landscape and associating them on the basis of coincidence (Arnds, 2010: 336-7). Indeed, Sebald sometimes invented unexplained connections in order to then discuss events (Smith, 2017). By making these spatio-temporal leaps, his narratives adopt a “portrayal of history... that is cyclical and filled with uncanny repetitions”, which “purely rationalist conceptions” of history would not consider (Hui, 2010: 296, 291). This repetitiveness of the history of violence is embodied in the public traces, from ruins to memories, of violence that has not been witnessed (or has been repressed) by Sebald's narrators. “[U]nexpected conjunctions of spaces and times” are made on the basis of these traces' present constitution *as* traces – including their partiality and fragmentation, their “wearing-down” – rather than any certain details of what took place in the past (Kochhar-Lindgren, 2002: 379).

In Sebald's fiction, these associations through digression and coincidence represent a way to ethically approach unseen violence without presuming that one need, or can, access either the objective truth of events or the subjective experiences of those involved. As Michael Hutchins argues, Sebald forgoes positing causal relationships

between events (except through playful invention), out of fear that to make such claims risks objectifying and instrumentalising the natural world for human manipulation. Instead, Sebald “set[s] up historical connections that are impossibly improbable, non-formulaic and non-causal in their relationships”, juxtaposing events in order to “discover meaningful, non-causal connections across time and space” that would otherwise remain unapparent (Hutchins, 2011: 59, 55). The aim is to “mak[e] sense of the world through the use of coincidence”, through “willed association” (ibid: 58, 38). To echo Ceuppen's language, this making-sense remains faithful to the irrecoverable past precisely by accepting that any representation of the past is hopeless and moreover dangerous, in that it risks codifying narratives of history that claim objectivity and so efface people and events. By conceptualising the history of violence as repetitious, Sebald suggests that any narrative of history as a singular and linear progression “shears off certain events” that do not fit that narrative, producing “an excess”. The aim of Sebald's narrative strategies, from repetition to digression, is not to reincorporate that excess and produce a 'more complete' narrative of history, but to demonstrate how the traces of excess events unsettle and “fragment” any linear narrative, by prompting an experience of that fragmentation in readers (Joldersma, 2014: 138-9, 143-4).

This fragmentation of linear history is an alternative act of witnessing towards irrecoverable violence. The incongruous digressions and associations of Sebald's narratives, the “sorting” and “layering” that enacts “a simultaneity of space-times” (Kochhar-Lindgren, 2002: 372), prompt a recognition of the shearing off that results from linear historical accounts of violence. Thus the digressive travels of Sebald's characters suggest that “witnessing, or bearing witness, is always in some way a repetition without a final word: the narrator is no more able to turn the stories into a final statement than are the other characters” (Ceuppens, 2004: 191). Through the

coincidental associations that defer this 'final word', the act of witnessing is reoriented from the violence itself to its public traces and their discursive dynamics in the present: how the people and events behind those traces are effaced in representations of violence, even as those traces shape present landscapes and experiences. Sebald thus circumvents the ethical dilemmas associated with attempts to recognise subjectivities, and with claiming mastery over nature through linear narratives, and asserts the ethical value of instead exploring the possibility of non-causal historical connections between events (Hutchins, 2011: 58-9). Tracing representational echoes of violence emerges as a more ethical relationship towards violence than any attempt at witnessing the unseen events and suffering themselves.

This is the ethico-political rationale for associating vastly different violence that the thesis builds upon in linking lynching with covert counter-terrorism. When confronted with rumours and debris of counter-terrorism that provide no access to 'what really happened', the disruption of linear time and the use of coincidence embodied in Sebald's fiction can circumvent the problem of witnessing this violence, and insodoing can reframe the question of an ethical orientation towards the residue of unseen events. In this thesis, I use an example of Sebald's willed association from *The Rings of Saturn* to formulate a qualitative method of analysing representations of the traces of unseen violence, which I call historical affiliation. As detailed in chapter two, this affiliation stays with the existence of traces *as* traces, and uses juxtaposition to analyse how the absent bodies and objects that are hinted at in these traces are implicitly represented in ways that may go unnoticed because not explicitly articulated. The above discussion predicts not just the use of this method throughout the thesis, but the argument in the Conclusion that affiliation can point towards a more ethical witnessing of covert violence today.

Chapter outline

The thesis proceeds as follows. The first chapter examines previous scholarly attempts to theorise the role of state secrecy in shaping public representations of covert action. This previous work has focused both on Cold War portrayals of covert operations and representational practices during the last decade-and-a-half of the so-called War on Terror. By identifying the presumptions made by this scholarship, the chapter argues that this work has conceptualised state secrecy as something whose public existence is instigated and shaped solely by the state – that state secrecy materialises and becomes recognisable in that sphere when and how the state wants it to. This presumption supports a second made by this literature: that representations of covert action foster public assent towards state violence, by prompting the public to understand these operations in ways consistent with their state rationale. State secrecy is presumed to prompt understandings of covert action as exceptionalist state actions justified by the barbarism of its terrorist targets, with that secrecy signified through state articulations to the public and glimpses of covert agents in action.

The chapter uses an example of contemporary representations of covert action to argue that these two presumptions are no longer valid: covert counter-terrorism is represented today not through state declarations and glimpses of operations, but through markers of these operations' aftermaths which are contextualised by silence from the state. The secrecy that is produced by these representational practices is therefore one which is not instigated and controlled by the state – it is signified as a mere suspicion through the rumours and debris of posited actions. The chapter uses this different kind of public or open secrecy to argue that representations of contemporary covert action are unlikely to foster public assent towards state violence. Instead, they are

more likely to shape subject-positions that are closer to acquiescence, whereby covert action is made meaningful in terms of ambiguities that stem from the lack of a state rationale for that covertness. These ambiguities undermine assent by placing the covert power and capabilities of the state in doubt, but insodoing they represent covert counter-terrorism as enigmatic.

The second chapter complements the previous one by examining whether the rumours and debris of covert violence might produce meaning that goes beyond this enigmatic quality and the issue of a rationale for secrecy. Answering this question means turning from secrecy to absence. Contemporary covert operations are represented in public through things left in their wake which signify that those operations have passed unseen – from rumours and speculation around what exactly might have happened to material and less-than-material debris apparently left at the site of these operations. The chapter theorises these markers as residue, traces of covert events that signify those events have passed unseen. Using an extended comparison of two aesthetically-similar images of state violence – an Israeli air strike in Gaza and a drone strike in Yemen – the chapter examines what distinguishes residue from other representational markers of seemingly similar events. Based on these representational differences, the chapter argues that residue materialises absence in the public sphere, by signifying that not everything about these covert operations is present or apparent in their aftermath. When framed by a suspicion of secrecy, as discussed in the first chapter, residue and its absences are represented as significant in having not been secreted.

Framed in this way, the absences within residue can signify not just a lack but rather suggestive ideas about that which is absent. These unverifiable possibilities shape ethical orientations that go beyond acquiescence. The chapter draws on recent colonial historiography to theorise these implicit significations as intimations, which exceed and

reshape the meanings produced by the explicit articulations within representations. In order to better understand how those meanings shape ethical orientations towards absent people, the chapter introduces an historical affiliation between contemporary covert counter-terrorism and lynching practice in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, based on their shared representational dynamics of absence and a distancing from wider society. This affiliation is offered as a way of exploring how representations position absent people and objects as more or less relevant to the portrayed significance of this violence. As the subsequent chapters demonstrate, this historical affiliation can reveal representational dynamics which otherwise would go unnoticed.

The third chapter uses the theoretical and methodological tools developed in the opening two chapters to examine U.S. and British press and social media representations of covert drone strikes in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia from 2011 to 2015. The chapter first examines the previous literature on drone strikes, arguing that by locating the ontology of drone warfare within the materials and practices that the state uses to enact strikes, this literature has neglected the public existence of strikes, the role of secrecy in shaping that existence, and the spaces and identities which materialise as a result. The chapter argues that the residue of covert strikes – from rumours about their operating procedures to the smoke and rubble left in their wake – signifies a suspicion of secrecy which allows this residue to intimate ideas about absent people and objects, in particular the possibility that the identities of casualties may be secreted or remain unknown. These intimations undermine the state's abstracted rationalisation of 'targeted killing', but insodoing they implicitly represent strikes as ephemeral, as events that are ongoing but are simply too fleeting and too insubstantial in their public footprint to be understood and scrutinised. This representation produces an ethical

orientation similar to that towards lynching a century earlier, one focused on the struggle to comprehend the confounding dynamics of unseen violence. This orientation marginalises the violence inflicted upon casualties, with those casualties intimated as worthy of consideration only in reflecting the intangibility of strikes.

The fourth chapter turns to U.S. and British press coverage of the U.S. Navy Seals raid in Abbottabad, Pakistan, on the compound of Osama bin Laden. Previous scholarship of the raid has argued that its public representation fostered public assent towards the killing of bin Laden. Yet this scholarship has failed to examine the importance that secrecy played in the public portrayal and discussion of the raid, particularly around the U.S.'s decision not to release documentation of the raid and of bin Laden's mortally wounded body. To explore this dynamic, the chapter assesses previous IR literature on a parallel between photographs of torture at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and lynching photographs. While this parallel is based on the visualisation of mutilated bodies, the chapter argues that a different parallel can be based on the *secretion* of those bodies, since images of lynch victims were rarely disseminated nationally in the United States. The secretion of those images among lynching perpetrators and sympathetic communities signified who had the power to see and control the meaning of violated bodies. The secretion of images of bin Laden's corpse seemed similarly designed to control the meaning of his death, but the acknowledgement of that act allowed it to circulate alongside other residue of the raid which either remained ambiguous or was not contextualised by the state. That residue intimated unverifiable ideas about the raid and that bin Laden's body was being kept hidden precisely in order to avoid these possibilities entering the public sphere. Framed as such, the state narratives for the raid lost their representational power. This implicit representation of covert violence, however, shaped a narrow and self-absorbed ethical

orientation towards that violence, positioning the event as discomfiting because of what the hiding of bin Laden's body might suggest about the significance of the raid for a collective counter-terrorist identity.

The fifth chapter analyses press coverage of U.S. and other states' secretive responses to the kidnapping of workers and tourists in the Sahara-Sahel by Islamist terrorists over the past few years. These operations appear to leave little residue in their wake aside from rumours and speculation as to what has happened, along with opaque material traces. These rumours, however, are contextualised by references to the landscape of the Sahara and Sahel regions. The chapter therefore extends the historical affiliation with lynching by detailing how the meanings attached to rural hanging lynchings were shaped by representations of the natural landscapes where they took place. Characteristics of the landscape figuratively and materially overlapped markers of lynching violence, giving that violence meaning in a way which foreclosed consideration of its wider social context, while also allowing the landscape to embody that violence. The chapter argues that a similar dynamic takes place in representations of rescue efforts and manhunts in the Sahara-Sahel. Rumours of these operations implicitly signify that claims around these events can neither be proved nor disproved. These rumours accompany representations of the Saharan and Sahelian landscapes as vast, undifferentiated and barren, signifying the absence of substantial residue. Through these characteristics, those landscapes come to signify and embody that ambiguity of knowledge. When framed by a suspicion of secrecy, those landscapes and the absences that they materialise are made suggestive, intimating the unverifiable idea that covert counter-terrorism is ongoing in this region but is being kept hidden by the terrain and texture of the Sahara-Sahel. This intimation defines these operations by a paradox: that seemingly empty landscapes might be complicit in the secretion of rumoured

operations. This shapes an ethical orientation focused on this unverifiable possibility, defining violence by its surroundings which, as with rural lynchings, marginalises any wider socio-political context.

The Conclusion begins by examining recent residue that has emerged in the public sphere around the rendition and detention programme that was formalised after 11 September 2001. This is a programme that has become defined in public discourse through iconic images of prisoners in orange jumpsuits at Guantánamo Bay and detainees being tortured at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. In contrast to these images, the recent residue of this programme intimates meanings that go beyond the demonisation and dehumanisation of victims of this U.S. and British policy. The Conclusion details some of this residue in order to argue for the need to go beyond the extremities of covert counter-terrorism violence in order to formulate an ethical witnessing of that violence. While iconic glimpses of detention and torture at 'black sites' have defined the dilemma of ethical witnessing in terms of responding to suffering, the residue analysed throughout the thesis provides no such glimpse and thus shifts the stakes of that witnessing. This provides the final part of the historical affiliation with lynching: as with that violent practice, an analytical focus on the extremities risks narrowly defining the violence and neglecting how its dynamics are perpetuated by an understanding of it as distanced from wider society. Ethical responsiveness to covert counter-terrorism must therefore be decoupled from responding to suffering. Not only is such suffering not present in the residue left in the public sphere, but an analytic that equates ethics with recognition is based on the idea that casualties are being dehumanised in public representations of this violence. This neglects the fact that, as previous chapters demonstrate, a state rationalisation of this violence is undermined by intimations from residue. Resistance to state frames of meaning is inadequate for ethical witnessing of

residue.

Just as the presumption behind recognising suffering is flawed, so too is the analytic which is forwarded to provide that recognition. This is an analytic of recovery, of reclaiming suffering subjectivities from the absences in these representations of unseen violence. Rather than try to fill in absence in this way, an ethical response to residue would scrutinise how those absences, and the people that they refer to, are implicitly given meaning by representations of residue in ways which go unnoticed because not explicitly stated. It is this meaning-making which shapes an ethical orientation towards covert counter-terrorism that marginalises consideration of the violence in-and-of-itself. Ethics need not involve knowledge of and an affective response to suffering, but can be based on self-awareness, an awareness of how witnesses are prompted by the rumours and debris of violence to understand absent people and objects as meaningful and significant. In this case, that self-awareness would scrutinise the positioning of witnesses as *distanced* from these operations, rather than *connected* to them through encounters with residue which shape their meaning. The Conclusion argues that an historical affiliation with lynching is precisely one way in which this kind of ethical witnessing can be invited.

Chapter 1

State secrecy and public assent: Past and present representations of covert action

It is striking how much contemporary counter-terrorism is openly characterised in covert terms. As combat operations have officially wound down in both Iraq and Afghanistan, public discourse has shifted to an array of secretive state activities portrayed as the new major theatres of violent U.S. foreign policy. The CIA programme of armed Unmanned Aerial Vehicles or drones – in Pakistan, Yemen and elsewhere – is frequently described as a “covert programme” that represents “the next phase in the so-called “war on terror”” (*Reprieve*, 2015), a programme that epitomises “Barack Obama's secret war on terror” (Woods, 2012). Elsewhere there is talk of a “shadow war” of ‘capture/kill operations’ carried out by U.S. Special Forces in different countries (Kelley, 2013), of a “covert war in North Africa” against terrorists and hostage-takers that involves “[s]mall teams of special operations forces” (Dozier, 2012), and collated evidence of a “covert ‘war on terror’” in Somalia involving “surveillance, reconnaissance, and assault and capture operations” (*The Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, 2015). Regardless of the novelty or otherwise of these operations under the Obama administration (Jackson, 2011; Ryan, 2011), public discourse in the U.S. and other states linked to this action has become saturated with notions of secret state violence, this following a period when more overt warfare was seen as the most significant of counter-terrorism efforts.

The above references to U.S. counter-terrorism demonstrate a point made in the Introduction: that secrecy and publicity can overlap, with secrecy being signified and

given its own characteristics such that it shapes the representation of foreign policy *as secret*. If the aim of this thesis is to examine how characterisations of secrecy shape these portrayals – and how secrecy then interacts with absences in those portrayals – what is first needed is a theorisation of how secrecy overlaps publicity, how it becomes a part of public discourse. The secrecy studied in the following chapters, however, is secrecy of the *state*; the ability to analyse the representational dynamics of covertness will therefore depend on how covertness is theorised in relation to the state. This not only prepares the ground for the analysis to come, but develops a wider argument about the supposed hegemony of states' discourses around their own violence. As noted in the Introduction, much of the critical scholarship on security politics presumes that the state's rationalisation of its counter-terrorism pre-conditions public discourse and thus the interpellation of citizens. The present chapter develops a critique of this presumption that the shaping of subject-positions towards state violence is necessarily a hegemonic imposition. It does so by arguing that the secrecy of contemporary counter-terrorism rubs against one of the conceptual bases of this critical presumption: that subject-positions are produced necessarily as a result of an address made by one subject to another, from the state to the public.

To develop this argument, the chapter assesses the previous critical literature on the representational dynamics of state secrecy, and the role of that secrecy in shaping subject-positions towards covert action. Previous scholarship correctly identifies covert action as something that often exists as an open secret, with representations being shaped not just by the idea of secrecy but by ideas as to *what* is being kept hidden. However, this literature has concluded that such open secrets necessarily prompt public assent towards covert action. The chapter unpacks the conceptual presumptions that lead to this conclusion. Recent theoretical work on state secrecy has taken the discursive

existence of that secrecy – its representation in public discourse – to be instigated and determined by the state itself. It is the state which is thought to produce state secrecy in the public sphere, with any role played by secrecy in public discourse therefore reflecting state decisions or intentions and signifying the state's power, its being able to carry out activities away from the public eye. This link between secrecy and the state lays the foundation for a particular theory of covert operations, as the chapter demonstrates through an analysis of literature on covert action representations. The representation of covertness has been theorised as prompting the public to view covert violence on the same terms as its perpetrators, to accept a discursive framework of the rationale and identities of covert action which are implied by the violence and its covertness. Since state secrecy is what prompts the adoption of this framework, state secrecy is therefore theorised as interpellating public assent, perpetuating a binary assent-dissent conception of the public's positioning towards state violence.

By excavating these two presumptions from previous scholarship – of secrecy as a state instrument and of covertness as aligning the witness' gaze with covert action's perpetrators – the chapter argues that this theory of state secrecy relies on the latter being produced by two things: state invocations, explicit or implicit, that it is carrying out certain activities, and glimpses of those activities. The combination of these two things is what articulates that not everything is being publicly revealed about state activities. Using the example of a 2014 drone strike in Pakistan, the chapter argues that representations of contemporary covert counter-terrorism cannot fit into the above model of public assent because state secrecy is not being produced in the same way: neither state invocations nor glimpses of covert violence are present. Instead, a combination of state silence and markers of operations' remainders or after-effects signify secrecy as a mere *suspicion*. This suspicion of secrecy does not prompt witnesses

of state silence and the aftermath of violence to view covert operations through a discursive framework matching that of the state: while a state rationale for counter-terrorism might be articulated in the abstract within public discourse, a state rationale for the suspected *covert*ness of operations such as this drone strike in Pakistan is not addressed or implied to the public. Such operations are therefore unlikely to interpellate public assent towards that use of covertness.

Instead of shaping complicity with a state rationale, these representations prompt witnesses to focus on the uncertain and ambiguous details of these unseen operations, implicitly signifying questions over the aims and capabilities of the state. This raises the challenge of conceptualising subject-positions towards covert violence that go beyond assent and dissent: for while assent is undermined in this case, the chapter argues that the seemingly enigmatic traces of unseen covert events are likely to prompt a focus on that enigmatic quality, at the expense of fostering dissent or a contesting of the violence itself. This suggests that ethical witnessing here may hinge on how that enigmatic quality of covert action's traces is made intelligible to witnesses. This question of meaning-making is developed in the following chapter, which theorises how a suspicion of secrecy shapes the meaning of *absences* within the rumours and debris of covert events; this interaction of secrecy and absence produces subject-positions that exceed a simple focus on the inscrutable. The present chapter first demonstrates, however, that what is at stake in examining covert counter-terrorism is how secrecy is conceptualised in relation to the state: whether state secrecy is thought to be discursively owned by the state, or whether it can exist in public discourse outside state decisions and articulations, and thus challenge an understanding of interpellation as a matter of assenting to or dissenting from a state address.

The open secret of covert action

Despite their being ostensibly hidden by the state from the public, covert operations have a long history of being publicly-represented in different forms. From news media accounts to popular 'spycraft' novels to spectacular Hollywood films and immersive computer games, the public has been presented with detailed and visceral understandings of what counter-terrorist covert action is actually like, both during the Cold War (Rogin, 1990) and in the post-9/11 period (Ingram and Dodds, 2011). This representational depth demonstrates the peculiar discursive existence of covert operations: their being phenomena that are both hidden and visible. These operations constitute official state secrets: they are rarely admitted to publicly by the state, nor are details of individual operations officially made available for public consumption. And yet covert counter-terrorism is far from unknown: their general existence is part of public discourse and characterisations of these kind of operations do circulate in, and thus materialise the norms and limits of, the public sphere. While drone strikes and kill/capture operations are not broadcast or documented for public consumption, public discourse does include details of what drones and special forces operatives are like, their objectives, how operations are conducted, and that these are ongoing out of the public eye.

In one respect, this curious discursive existence of covert action reflects the more general existence of secrets. For a secret to be produced in public discourse, it is not enough for an actor to hold knowledge that others do not possess; that inequality of knowledge must be articulated, along with the indication that the contents of the secret will not be disclosed to those others (Blakely 2012, 49). This understanding of how secrecy operates in the public sphere is a first step towards conceptualising state secrecy's representational dynamics. The signification that a secret is being held

produces what has been called a secrecy effect, an awareness of a social relation between those who are in the know and those who are not (Derrida, 1994: 245-6). But the kind of public knowledge percolating around contemporary covert operations is not simply the knowledge that a secret is being held; it is somewhat-unverifiable knowledge about the *contents* of the supposed secret.

Covert state practices whose contents are suggestively detailed in the public sphere exist as public or open secrets, things which are generally known but cannot be easily articulated, owing in this case to the secrecy surrounding them and the indefinite nature of the details circulating about them (Taussig, 1999: 7-8). In elaborating upon this notion, Clare Birchall conceptualises the ‘known unknown’ of the open secret as that whereby the “withholding, obfuscation and opacity” which maintains the secret becomes *part* of a representational phenomenon. This representation articulates something *as* secret but signifies its characteristics other than ‘being secret’ as either unknown or unverifiable – its contents are represented as “that which everybody unofficially knows or suspects, but proof (and therefore knowledge) of which remains elusive” (Birchall, 2014: 33). Gargi Bhattacharyya theorises this open secrecy specifically in relation to covert state violence, positing open secrets as actions and events whose general existence is known but whose specificities remain largely hidden, with the public only having access to “almost-knowledge”, that is, to “knowledge [about these events] that resists substantiation”. This representation of covert operations through open secrecy results in “an imaginary space in which a global public can surmise what may occur but cannot verify through official sources” (Bhattacharyya, 2008: 112, 59). Birchall characterises this as an interpellative state of “know[ing] and not know[ing] at the same time”, a representation of “knowledge’s fallibility and accommodation of its lack” (Birchall, 2014: 34). Open secrets are therefore events or actions which, while

portrayed as being kept hidden by state elites, nevertheless exist in the public sphere in the form of suggestive and unverifiable snippets of information about what is being kept hidden.

To say that a representation is of an open secret is to say that this representation is likely to be understood as a suggestive snippet of a state secret, of a violent practice *that remains largely hidden*. Open secrets are things which indicate their own partiality.

Secrecy as a state instrument

While an open secret may rely upon the signification of a social relation between those in the know and those out of it, recent theoretical writings on state secrecy have concluded that this signification is necessarily one articulated by the state which holds the secret. This analytic of state secrecy uses the social relation between the state and the public as the basis for conceptualising the representational dynamics of state secrecy, and consequently delimits those dynamics to secrecy's instrumental use by the state. While IR and cultural studies scholarship has increasingly acknowledged that secrecy need not delimit representations of state practices but can actually shape them by becoming part of those portrayals (eg. Birchall, 2014; Walters, 2015; Anaïs and Walby, 2016), attempts to theorise state secrecy have gone further by positing a *conceptual* link between the state and the secrecy that surrounds its practices, theorising state secrecy through the notion of state strategy. This notion leads to a narrow conceptualisation of the public dynamics of state secrecy, as being instigated and determined by the state in order to support its covert activities. This is despite the fact that the question of state secrecy's political rationale is distinct from that of its representational dynamics; the two may co-align but it is not a necessity within any

representation.

One notable line of thinking on state secrecy after 11 September 2001 stems from Jack Bratich, who theorises state secrecy as being signified and scrutinised in the public sphere such that it continues to mystify the covert operations under its purview (Bratich, 2006; see also Perkins and Dodge, 2009; Paglen, 2010). Knowledge and details of the existence of covert action – the kind of snippets that turn these operations into open secrets – percolate the public sphere but these snippets' representation of operations only seems to further confuse public understanding of such action. Bratich characterises this public performance of secrecy as a matter of turning “[r]evelations” of the existence of covert action into “a *strategy* of public perception management”, one that “renew[s] the power of the spectacle as it *appropriates* the powers of secrecy for itself” (Bratich, 2006: 498, emphases added). In speaking of revelations of secrets as a public perception strategy, Bratich traces secrecy's representational dynamics back to the state, as that which reveals secrets in an equivocal or ambiguous manner and uses that representational power to restrict the interpellative possibilities of the public. By conceptualising secrecy as “a tool of governing” that is “put... in circulation” solely when “deployed as strategy by the state”, Bratich delimits the representational dynamics associated with a “‘making visible’ of secrecy” to those that act as “a way of short-circuiting critique” (ibid: 501, 496). The representational dynamics of state secrecy are restricted to only those likely intended by the state itself as a means to stymie critique of covert action.

A second recent theorisation by Eva Horn echoes this restriction. Horn differentiates between two 'political logics' of secrecy, two ways that the “withdrawal from knowledge, communication and debate” can “be *enacted*” by a political actor (Horn, 2011: 108, emphasis added). The first is the logic of 'arcanum', where state secrecy is

produced by keeping state practices “locked away and hidden” from the public for the purposes of effective government, opening up an exceptionalist space for state action that stabilises state power and so ultimately maintains the rule of law (ibid: 108, 105-6). The second is the logic of 'secretum', where secrecy is produced in public discourse through “the awareness (or belief or suspicion) *that* a secret exists”; secrecy is thus represented as a relation of “social inclusion and exclusion” between “those who suspect and those who are 'supposed to know'” (ibid: 109, emphasis in original). In either case, Horn argues, the discursive dynamics of secrecy are produced by the state's withholding of information. In the logic of arcanum, the state's “technique of silence and concealment”, rather than any specific secret, is represented as reflecting “the prerogative of power to withhold certain issues from debate, avoid justifications and instead take care of issues behind closed doors”; by thus keeping potentially-damaging secrets out of the public sphere, the state remains legitimised (ibid: 108, 107). In the logic of secretum, where the public suspects a secret, the representation of the state as having “the potential for future disclosure” of the secret “constitutes the power that [the secret's] holder has over others” (ibid: 109). In Horn's theorisation, then, it is the state's act of withholding that instigates and determines state secrecy's role in public discourse, with secrecy either rationalising state power or nonetheless confirming that power in the eyes of the public.

A final significant theorisation of state secrecy has been provided by Joseph Masco. Masco argues that the U.S. state has increasingly justified its withholding of information about its practices on the grounds that any piece of information, no matter how seemingly innocuous, potentially poses a threat to national security once in the public sphere, since it could be combined with other bits of information to produce dangerous knowledge (Masco, 2010). Masco sees this justification as an extension of the

Cold War-era association made by the U.S. between classified information on nuclear weapons and apocalyptic consequences, with the state “discursively positioning every classified file as potentially an “atomic secret”” (ibid: 443). In the period following 11 September 2001 this practice has been expanded, with information simply being removed from public circulation, rather than officially classified, on the grounds of 'innocent' data's accumulative threat. Masco argues that the state's discursive positioning of information determines secrecy's representational dynamics, with the state using “a vast system of secrecy” as “a fully nationalised system of perception management and control” (ibid). By “promising catastrophic consequences for... revelation” while “classifying the considerations, evidence, and precedents supporting such an assertion”, thus denying the public any knowledge of the considered consequences of covert action, the state shapes a public subject-position whereby any repercussions of covert action in the form of 'blowback' “appear to the U.S. public as without context and thus irrational”. This subject-position reiterates identities of an inherently violent terrorist enemy and a calm U.S. state “provoked by irrational attacks” (ibid, 454, 450). Secrecy, once again, is conceptualised as an instrument of state strategy whose discursive dynamics are determined by state intent and actions.

In each of these theorisations, the existence of secrecy in public discourse is dependent upon the state – secrecy is conceptualised as something addressed *by* the state *to* the public and which shapes meanings conducive to that state. This conceptualisation begs the question of state secrecy's discursive dynamics by presuming they necessarily align with the state's political rationale for its secrecy. There is no *a priori* reason why public secrecy should align with state rationales; that depends on *how* state secrecy is represented in public discourse and *from where* significations of secrecy arise. To presume that state secrecy is shaped solely by the state reifies Jodi Dean's claim

that since secrecy “suggests a world relationships that have been *withheld*”, “the actual contents of a secret are therefore immaterial”, with secrecy being merely “a *form* that can be filled in with all sorts of contents and fantasies” (Dean, 2002: 10, emphases added). These theories use the social form of state secrecy – of a state actor withholding from others – as the basis for understanding how secrecy produces meaning. From this perspective, state secrecy shapes public discourse as part of the state's manipulation of the public sphere, and so propagates state hegemony.

Gazing at covert violence: state secrecy and assent

If state secrecy's public existence is a product of its instrumental articulation by the state, any part it plays in representations of covert violence will appear designed to forward state objectives in some way. Studies of the representation of covert action have turned this predisposition into an explicit theory. This scholarship has traced the representational dynamics of state secrecy to two elements within portrayals of covert operations: first, textual and visual snippets of covert action being carried out, with those snippets theorised as providing some minimal, mediated glimpse of the violence; and second, the context provided these glimpses by invocations from the state that it is carrying out some form of covert action. The combination of these two elements signifies that the state is keeping secrets from the public, that not everything about covert action is being revealed and that these representations provide the only glimpse of what remains a secret. Theories of this covertness echo the scholarship on war and media discussed in the Introduction. As demonstrated below, these theories argue that state invocations of covertness signify a rationale for the use of that secrecy which gives particular meaning to glimpses of covert violence. By providing a rationale for covertness when signifying secrecy, the state prompts witnesses to understand these

glimpses of covert violence through the same discursive framework as that invoked by the perpetrators of these operations. State secrecy therefore makes covert action meaningful through the characterisations and identities implied by its enactment. Since that secrecy is thought to further state objectives, this scholarship argues that the covertness of these operations perpetuates the discursive violence of these events, making them meaningful through the very terms that rationalise them; the public thus becomes complicit in and assents to state violence.

This representational dynamic of state secrecy takes on different forms depending on the time-frame considered. Timothy Melley theorises the secrecy of Cold War covert operations as emerging from a combination of official state acknowledgements that violent covert action is being hidden from the public and glimpses of that violence, in the form of entertainment spectacles of covert agents in action. The open secrecy that results is theorised as making covert action tolerable for the public by interpellating witnesses into accepting that they *should not* know about those things which are being kept secret. To make this argument, Melley adapts Louis Althusser's example of interpellation whereby the subject responds to the policeman who shouts "Hey, you there!", by turning round, thus being 'hailed' into the subject-position they think is suggested by that shout (Althusser, 1971: 174). In the case of Cold War state acknowledgements of covert action, "instead of the subject answering when the state says, "Hey, you!" ... [the public] close their eyes when the state, "Don't look"". Melley calls this subject-position one of "mystified submission" (Melley, 2012: 15).

The public persists in looking away because it has something else to look at, namely fantastic fictional narratives centred around heroic covert agents, what Michael Rogin calls an "easily forgettable series of surface entertainments – movies, television series, political shows". These entertainment spectacles are signified as glimpses of

covert action which allow witnesses to “have the experience” of viewing such operations without being prompted to consider their real socio-political impacts, since these “covert spectacles” are represented as mere theatre – “the reality principle never reaches, directly and forcefully, into [the public’s] lives (as it did, for example, in the 1930s depression or the 1960s draft” (Rogin, 1990: 106, 117). The understanding of covert ops signified by these fantasies constitutes a particular form of Birchall’s ‘knowing and not knowing’ that makes those operations an open secret. That these fantastical representations of covert action can be dismissed as having no real-world consequence is important because they portray covert agents as figures who must *usurp* the law and normal democratic procedures in order to *protect* these things, and by extension the public, from subversive threats to this ‘way of life’ (Melley, 2012: 210-12). These fantasies of covert action fall into a representational tradition of countersubversion, where a supposedly subversive threat to one’s ‘way of life’ is characterised in demonological terms – as monstrous, barbaric or evil in some sense or other – such that tactics which actually *mirror* this threatening enemy’s behaviour are justified as necessary (Rogin, 1987: xiii).

It is the representational dynamic of covertness itself which supports this narrative of covert violence as a necessary exceptionalism. The state secrecy produced in the public sphere by state appeals to look away and fantasies of ‘exceptional but necessary’ covert violence signifies that concrete details of actual covert action are being kept secret for a reason: so that the public can maintain a separation between its self-perception as democratic and civilised and any extralegal, unpleasant and uncivilised actions of covert agents which might challenge that self-perception. State appeals of ‘Don’t look!’ and entertainment spectacles of heroic but maverick agents together suggest that keeping covert ops secret is in the public’s best interests (Melley, 2012: 173-

174). The subject-position produced by state secrecy is therefore one from which witnesses tolerate covert action as a necessary exceptionalism, so long as they are not told the dirty details of operations.

In the case of covert operations during the so-called 'War on Terror' following 11 September 2001, the state's acknowledgement of covert action has been theorised not as a simple invocation not to look, nor are entertainment spectacles of exceptionalist heroic agents the only glimpses now provided. Though such glimpses continue to be propagated (Brereton and Culloty, 2012), they now compete with glimpses of a different kind. In the War on Terror period, the notion that covert action is being carried out without public awareness is often conveyed implicitly rather than explicitly, as in the case of redacted documents from the Bush administration on extraordinary rendition and torture. These documents have been theorised by Conley and Saas as articulations of a state acknowledgement of its secrecy: by placing thick strips of black ink over parts of the text, or in some cases simply replacing pages of text with the notice 'Denied in Full', information is not so much hidden as *visibly obscured*, thus signifying state secrecy in public. In the context of questions over whether 'enhanced interrogation techniques' constitute torture, these documents have been conceptualised as "a mischievous way to admit the inadmissible" regarding these techniques, a way for the state to suggest that problematic techniques are being used by 'passing over' or declining to describe the policy, instead "naming through coyly refusing to name" (Conley and Saas, 2010: 331). This redaction acts both as a state acknowledgement of secrecy and a suggestion as to the nature of what is being hidden, a way of implicitly admitting that yes, problematically violent techniques might be being used covertly: "when viewing heavily redacted memos one is left wondering what lies beneath the smattering of black ink. Left to its own devices, the mind can imagine any

number of ghastly deeds so hidden in the dark” (ibid: 341).

This refusal to name and its suggestiveness has been theorised as signifying the incontestable way that certain bodies can now be treated by the state – incontestable because state secrecy ensures these practices remain unverifiable and their lines of accountability muddled. Alongside these refusals to name, covert action is now presented to the public not just through entertainment fantasies but through textual and visual glimpses of actual covert practice, from rendition to detention and torture (Peirce, 2012). These glimpses of real covert action are what prompt the imagination of Conley and Saas' 'ghastly deeds'. While they are not deliberately relayed by the state, nonetheless “[t]here is little attempt to hide what is being done, only to deny culpability” (Bhattacharyya, 2008: 121). This denial replaces state acknowledgements of any covert practice with mere “affirm[at]ions” of “the necessity of extreme measures”, with the state “never quite admitting to any particular allegation”. Covert practices are “not denied, but instead not admitted but justified with reference to our newly dangerous times” in terms of the terrorist threat faced (ibid: 140).

Gargi Bhattacharyya conceptualises state secrecy as emerging from this combination of state refusals to confirm or deny and glimpses of actual covert practices being enacted. The result is a state secrecy which signifies that these glimpses are horrifically suggestive but ultimately inconclusive: the lack of state acknowledgement and the partiality of glimpses signifies uncertainty over the nature of the covert practices portrayed and what remains covered up. The subject-position this produces is not one of entertained complacency but paralysed suspicion, with the public “see[ing] enough to learn to be terrified at what [they] do not see” and accepting the incontestability of the state's treatment of certain bodies (ibid: 59, 113-4). At the same time, by suggesting that much of these practices remain covered up or unsubstantiated,

state secrecy shapes a subject-position from which covert operations 'make sense' as exceptional actions of an uncivilised nature – that *this is why* they are being kept hidden – in contrast to the implicit normal civilised behaviour of the state (ibid: 142-4).

Witnesses are thus prompted to view glimpses of covert violence from the perspective of a horrified, and therefore civilised, counter-terrorist population; meanwhile, “[t]he barbarians are those beyond the contract of circulating knowledges” (ibid: 141) – that is, those who are presumed not to react with such horror.

Theorisations of the representation of covert action therefore take secrecy to be produced through a combination of two things: state invocations, explicit or implicit, regarding its covert activities and public glimpses, real or fantastical, of those activities. This state secrecy frames representations of covert operations such that those operations are made meaningful as exceptionalist state actions. In both theorisations, state secrecy signifies the power of the state: state invocations and glimpses indicate that the state has the ability to shape events away from the public eye, and that its counter-terrorism capabilities and effectiveness stem from this secretion. Thus the state is represented as “a quasi-divine being with extraordinary powers”, able to “secretly shape history” in “a space safe from social pressure” (Melley 2012: 119, 122).

In order to make these arguments that state secrecy fosters public assent and perpetuates state power, the scholarship discussed above implicitly invokes the analytic around the representation of war discussed in the Introduction. In this analytic, the mediated witnessing of violence makes the witness complicit in discursive violence against the represented sufferer. As discussed, this analytic pivots ethical witnessing on whether witnesses are prompted to imagine the subjectivity of sufferers through their affective response to their suffering. State rationales for its violence, this scholarship argues, can prevent this imagining by prompting witnesses to adopt a subject-position

paralleling the perpetrators of state violence. By understanding the represented violence through a state rationale, the witness' perspective is aligned with the perpetrator's 'gaze' and the witness reiterates a discursive framework implied by the violence itself. The witness sees the violated body as the perpetrator sees it, as de-contextualised evidence of a particular social identity and position within society (Alexander, 1994). As Sue Tait assesses the theory, this alignment of gazes is presumed to interpellate the public as “a participatory spectator in an act intended to terrorize”, with witnesses adopting and reiterating the state's rationalisation of its violence (Tait, 2008: 103).

By drawing on this analytic of witnessing and complicity in state violence, these theories of covert action representations echo the dominant critical conceptualisation of interpellation that exists today. Within this model, as detailed by Matthew Lampert, subject-positions are produced as a result of an address made by one subject to another: in this case, witnesses are confronted with a discourse articulated by the state regarding its covert activities and understand themselves as being 'hailed' by that discourse, leading them to respond to that imagined address (Lampert, 2015: 130). From this perspective, subject-formation or the adopting of subject-positions is always conceptualised as subordination to some hegemonic discourse which appears to address the witness (ibid: 140). The above theories of covert action representations echo this model of interpellation as responding to a hail, and so presume the hegemony of state discourses. The only difference is that state secrecy is placed at the centre of this dynamic. It is state secrecy that aligns the public's understanding with the state perpetrator of violence, by signifying the state's apparent *rationale for its secrecy* – either as a way for the public to maintain its civilised self-perception in the face of necessary exceptionalism, or as a way to obscure horrific violence which would otherwise contradict the 'normal' behaviour of the state. The rationale implied by the state's

articulation of secrecy constitutes the hail to which witnesses can respond only by assenting to or dissenting from the state's use of covert violence, of accepting or rejecting the state's rationalisation.

Given that these theorisations echo a theory of witnessing derived from *overt* violence, however, they sharply foreclose the political dynamics of state secrecy in public discourse. Secrecy, and the imaginary of the public sphere which is produced as a result, becomes just another way for hegemonic actors to interpellate the public into assenting to the former's violent practices. Moreover, this secrecy is a by-product of two very particular representational characteristics: state invocations and glimpses of state violence. The theorisation of these two characteristics together implicitly acknowledges that the subject-positions produced by representations of violence depend upon what markers of that violence are represented and how they are contextualised; these two elements are what shape how witnesses are prompted to understand the representation, for instance as either a legitimisation or a condemnation of the violence being represented (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2010: 53-9). Were the two characteristics in this case to disappear, the dynamics of state secrecy theorised above would not be produced in public discourse and the public's gaze could not be aligned with the state perpetrator's; witnesses might therefore be prompted differently.

Contemporary covert action and suspicions of secrecy

The above theories of state secrecy and covert action, whereby secrecy is an instrument of the state and prompts public assent, all depend on identifying the discursive dynamics of state secrecy, on tracing how those dynamics are produced and what they then do in representations. These theories locate state secrecy as emerging from

particular elements of Cold War and post-2001 representations: state invocations and glimpses of violence. Since this signification of state secrecy has to be empirically demonstrated in order to elaborate a theory of how that secrecy shapes the subject-positions of witnesses, the following section uses an example of contemporary covert counter-terrorism to examine whether the theory of covertness shared by the above scholarship is adequate for analysing contemporary covert action. Does state secrecy still enter the public sphere in the same way?

On 29th September 2014, U.S. news media reported that a U.S. drone strike had been carried out the previous day in Karikot, north-western Pakistan, the first strike carried out in the South Waziristan region in almost a year. The *New York Times'* report of the strike went little beyond the statement from “Pakistani officials” that the strike had occurred and a note of its material target, “[a] vehicle parked near a house” (Masood, 2014). What else was said about the strike took the form of speculation which emphasised how little was known. The strike was said to have killed “at least four people” who were “suspected of being militants”, with two “believed to be citizens of Arab nations” – “[b]ut their identities could not be immediately confirmed”. This is all that was said about the strike itself, with the rest of the article concerning itself with more general speculation over whether the U.S.'s “classified drone program” in Pakistan was winding down given the decreased number of strikes in recent months, as well as a note that “activists and the Pakistani government do not agree” on the number of civilian casualties from these strikes (ibid).

These kind of reports of strikes in their suspected aftermath constitute by far the most common public representation of drone strikes in Pakistan, Yemen and other countries, at least within those states such as the U.S. which conduct this covert counter-terrorism. The other most prominent representation of strikes takes the form

of speculation over the general operating procedures governing strikes, with the covert actions themselves being even further removed from the representational frame (eg. Becker and Shane, 2012; see chapter three). Given this, the above example demonstrates that these representations are not glimpses of those operations' violent enactment. Covert practices are not represented either through the visualisation of the target's violated body or through any other portrayals, real or fictional, of the violence being meted out by covert agents. In the case of the Karikot strike, the operation is instead represented through signifiers of the operation and its violence having passed unseen, without being witnessed. The vehicle is articulated as already-destroyed, the targets merely as a suspected death tally; their characterisation as such points to a violent event that has already occurred and that the public has not been able to observe. The rest of the article's more general speculation further emphasises the slightness of this reporting and the fact that the event has occurred unseen.

The covert strike is therefore not articulated through signifiers of its enactment, the infliction of the violence. There is no extended narration of the strike, nor glimpses of violated bodies. To be sure, demonising portrayals of the targets of *overt* counter-terrorism in official war theatres continue to circulate in public discourse, with terrorist bodies identified and represented in gendered, racialised and dehumanising ways (Steuter and Wills, 2010; Manchanda, 2015). Public discourse surrounding contemporary covert operations, however, has developed independently of these established discourses on terrorist threats and countersubversion; public discussion of covert drone strikes pivots not on glimpses of demonised bodies or snapshots of covert agents but on sparse after-the-fact accounts of individual strikes and speculation on their legal, institutional and operating mechanisms. These are not glimpses of the violence of covert operations, which is merely hinted at through signifiers of the event's

having passed unseen. When these operations enter the public sphere, therefore, their representation does not conceivably allow for any alignment of the public's understanding or gaze with one akin to covert violence's perpetrators. Such a perspective is simply not available.

In addition to this change in representational content, the context given to these news accounts by the state has also changed: state acknowledgements of its covert action are largely no longer present. Representations of contemporary covert counter-terrorism are not accompanied by state commands to look away, nor state refusals to confirm or deny. Instead, they are accompanied by state silence, a non-acknowledgement of such glimpses. In the above news report, the Karikot strike is revealed by "a local administration official" who spoke to the *Times* "on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to talk to the news media", a statement which materialises an official silence from Pakistan and, given the lack of any other statements, the U.S. in response to the event (Masood, 2014). This silence juxtaposes the articulation of the strike through unconfirmed rumour and contested speculation over clandestine U.S. operations in Pakistan; together, they signify state secrecy as a mere inferred *suspicion* based on how details of the event appear, are disseminated and are contextualised. The juxtaposition of the claim a strike occurred and the slightness of the report signifies that the strike has not been documented for witnesses, that it has passed unseen, and that not everything about the strike is publicly-visible in its aftermath. But because of the state's silence, its non-acknowledgement of the purported event, the representation does not definitively signify that the U.S. has been or is hiding something; what is signified is the likely possibility that the event was a secret kept by the state from the public.

Representations such as this, then, do not explicitly articulate that secrets are

being held by the state – both in terms of the event itself and in terms of certain details or material traces in the event's aftermath. As a consequence, the non-acknowledgement by the state and the lack of glimpses of covert agents in action mean that this representation does not articulate the *rationale for the secrecy* that is signified as a suspicion. While a reader may reasonably infer a rationale for the violence in terms of the threat of Islamist terrorism, which is how drone strikes have been justified in the abstract by the U.S. as a mode of 'targeted killing' (*The White House*, 2013), this rationalisation is not echoed by the representation, which provides no bodily markers of targets and perpetrators to act as 'proof' of the identities from such a narrative. But moreover, markers of this event's aftermath are not contextualised by a state declaration which, when combined with a glimpse of the action, would invoke a rationale for the operation *being covert*. By neither telling the public to look away nor refusing to confirm or deny, the state does not shape the meaning of the suspected secrecy which then implicitly frames the operation; the state therefore does not pre-condition the meaning of the rumours and debris left behind. State secrecy is signified and given materiality, through the ambiguous public traces left behind, but its rationale remains unresolved.

From assent to acquiescence

If state secrecy enters the public sphere in such a way that it does not signify a state rationale for its use, the theory of covertness as fostering public assent cannot hold. In a scenario where secrecy is produced not by state invocations and glimpses of covert agents but by non-bodily rumours and debris left in the wake of those agents, that secrecy does not belong to the state – that is, its discursive dynamics are neither instigated nor determined by state articulations. Secrecy is not being addressed by the state to the public, and as a result witnesses to these representations are not being hailed

by the state into a subject-position of complicity. Without a state rationale for its covertness, the discursive framework which witnesses might adopt is not produced and does not prompt those witnesses; there is therefore no rationalisation of the state's use of covertness for witnesses to 'assent' to.

Yet it could be argued at this point that a wider state narrative for its overall counter-terrorism strategy might over-determine the meaning attached to these covert operations. Certainly, this chapter has already acknowledged the continued circulation of representations that articulate a collective terrorist identity in demonic terms, and that therefore imply a rationale for actions identified as counter-terrorism. Perhaps even if state secrecy does not rationalise the use of covert violence for witnesses, other articulations might pre-condition how these news reports of indefinite information are nonetheless understood. What counters this argument is the fact that the suspicion of covertness produced in this news coverage itself shapes the representation of these covert events, not despite, but precisely because of the *lack* of a state rationale for secrecy in these accounts. Not being determined by the state, the representational dynamics of secrecy can signify things in excess of any wider state rationale for counter-terrorism. Any subject-position produced as a result therefore may not necessarily align with state objectives. In order to examine how a suspicion of state secrecy might prompt witnesses to consider these unseen covert events and their possible state sponsors, it is necessary to theorise subject-positions towards state violence that is not rationalised by the state, interpellations that would not fit a model of assent or dissent towards that violence.

Engels and Saas provide the beginnings of such a theorisation in their inquiry into official state discourse that has accompanied violent post-11 September 2001 U.S. foreign policy. Pointing to state invocations that are markedly different from those

studied in the works cited throughout this chapter, invocations that do not rationalise any glimpsed state violence, they argue that these discursive practices entail not public assent but what they call acquiescence. Alongside representations that act to “demoni[se] the enemy”, U.S. state officials have perpetuated rhetorics, characterisations and social practices that encourage the public to “leave the war-making to the professionals”, which implore the public “*trust us, we've got this*” (Engels and Saas, 2013: 227, 228, emphasis in original). Rather than indicate the state is carrying out covert activities and suggest why those are being kept hidden, this signification merely hints at possible ongoing covert activities without suggesting what they might be or prompting any particular subject-position on the part of the public towards those activities. Regardless of any glimpses of possible covert activity that might exist in the public sphere, no rationalisation is made either of state violence or its secrecy. State exceptionalism is neither implied nor justified; nor is the public prompted to avoid the dirty details. This state invocation is therefore unlikely to act as “a mobilisation of the public... for the prosecution of the “war on terror”” – assent is not the representational logic at work here (ibid: 227).

Instead of assent, whereby those addressed by the state adopt a discursive framework implied by both the glimpsed violence and the rationale for its covertness, Engels and Saas see this state invocation as “promoting a glazed-over half-acceptance” of unseen activity, “a process of coming to peace with war while withholding assent”, which they call acquiescence (ibid: 227, 228-9). This acquiescence is not assent towards the state, but nor is it a subject-position of dissent from or contesting state violence. This notion of acquiescence breaks out of the binary assent-dissent understanding of public positions towards state violence. While this notion therefore enriches the theorisation of state secrecy, the process by which such acquiescence might be produced

needs clarifying. For while Engels and Saas posit acquiescence in the singular, their argument actually hints at two different kinds of 'glazed-over half-acceptance' of state violence. One subject-position is produced by representations that "display war in such a way that it cannot be contested", "creat[ing] a symbolic landscape in which resistance to objective violence seems pointless" (ibid: 227). A second subject-position, however, is suggested by the idea that representations might "constitut[e] a distracted civic body numb to violence abroad", that they could prompt "numbness toward the unacceptable human costs of battle" (ibid: 227, 229).

If numbness is interpreted simply as a subject-position that is prevented from responding to violence by dissenting from or contesting the state, this interpellation need not result from a belief that dissent is impossible. Photographs of drones remaining stationary in hangers, or flying in empty, unspecified skies, fail to provide a sense of what that warfare is like, instead offering drab monotonous images of indistinguishable objects and spaces. Such images signify that they are inconsequential and will remain opaque despite scrutiny, inviting disinterest (Ohl, 2015: 615-6, 625). By signifying shared opacity and monotony, these photographs prompt a dulling of witnesses' senses in response to such representations, "corroding the very infrastructure of thought, feeling, and action" (ibid: 615). Prompted to feel unable to engage with boring warfare, witnesses become numb to these portrayals, as their capacity to respond politically to sensations of warfare is decreased.

In the case of news representations studied in this thesis, a different kind of acquiescence from numbness is produced, thanks to the lack of an actual state invocation that 'We've got this'. The snippets of information that represent covert operations such as the Karikot strike in public discourse signify state secrecy as an inferred suspicion, neither confirming nor denying *the covering up* of the event through

the use of plausible deniability. While details of these operations may be suggested unofficially by anonymous governmental and military figures, these suggestions do not signify how the public should react to these suspected events. They do not prompt witnesses to such events to look away, nor to understand the secrecy of these events in terms of a need to hide exceptionalism. They do not even implore the public to simply 'trust us' and leave things to the professionals. In other words, the state does not indicate that secrecy has been and continues to be used regarding these events, that they were hidden from the public. Instead, unofficial anonymous tip-offs act as unverified and often speculative hints about these events that exist alongside other hints from *outside* the state, in the form of material evidence and rumour left in their wake. Without a state narrative that might frame the significance of each piece of evidence, there is a levelling out of these hints within representations, whereby one seems no more definitive about these operations than any other.

Because the state does not signify a rationale for its covertness in this case, the secrecy that is articulated by public traces of state action can gain meaning through that lack of a rationale. For that lack is *itself signified*: ambiguities and uncertainties in news accounts of these events are framed by a suspicion of secrecy produced by those same accounts; this juxtaposition signifies that as a report on a state action, these ambiguities cannot explain or account for the use of secrecy by that state. In the case of the Karikot strike, the sparse, speculative and unverifiable qualities of the event's representation are made meaningful in relation to the possibility that the strike was a covert action. Those ambiguities are thus represented as ambiguities in the public record of the event, of how and why it happened *in secret*. Without a state rationalisation of secrecy to make sense of these ambiguities – to frame them, for instance, as things the public should look away from – the latter are represented as being unable to confirm for witnesses the extent of

secrecy and why it has possibly been used. State secrecy therefore positions witnesses towards the state and its use of violence in a way that does not fit a model of assent.

Such a subject-position is produced by the news report of the Karikot strike. When framed by the mere suspicion that the strike is a state secret, highlighted deficiencies in knowledge of the event gain meaning in terms of uncertainty over the secrecy's rationale. Being unmoored from state articulations, secrecy does not reiterate a narrative of the strike's rationale but represents gaps in knowledge as reflecting a lack of clear rationale. Therefore, because the suspected use of secrecy is not rationalised through representations of the targets, the lack of knowledge over their identities is implicitly represented as leaving unanswered who was targeted in secret, in what sense they were considered operationally important, and why they were targeted covertly rather than overtly. Suspicions around the casualties' nationality are framed similarly, prompting the question of whether that nationality is significant or merely an arbitrary scrap of available knowledge; again, without a rationalisation of secrecy, the reception of this detail is not pre-conditioned and made intelligible. Having not been articulated by the state in response to this event, the suspicion of secrecy signifies that it remains uncertain whether that secrecy extends to those identities, if they too are being kept hidden, and if so why. In lieu of state invocations, these gaps in knowledge are what give meaning to suspected secrecy, not in terms of a narrative of necessary exceptionalism, but in terms of uncertainty over the scope and aims of the secrecy itself.

By highlighting various unanswered questions or unspoken ambiguities regarding the Karikot strike, the suspicion of secrecy which emerges from this coverage does not reiterate the state's covert power and capabilities. Without a state rationale for the use of secrecy, newsreaders are not prompted to understand the event as indicating the efficacy of the state's covert instruments on its own terms. Rather than prompt an

adoption of the state's rationalisation of covertness in this way, state secrecy here prompts witnesses to focus on the absence of such a rationalisation, as reflected in uncertainties over what exactly happened. That absence is signified as raising the possibility of limits to or ambiguities around the state's covert power, that the capabilities of the state in its covert sphere remain unconfirmed. Without an articulation of secrecy by the state itself, the secrecy that materialises in rumours and debris does not echo a state narrative rationalising the use of violence, but instead emphasises that the extent and purpose of the secrecy remains unresolved. Any wider state rationalisation of its counter-terrorism therefore cannot determine the meaning of this representation: the uncertainty over the rationale for secrecy raises questions that undercut the certainty of claims about those targeted, preventing the latter from echoing a wider rationalisation.

While this representation of state secrecy disrupts the rationalisation of the state's use of violence, it does not shape a subject-position of dissent. News coverage of the Karikot drone strike does not make the strike intelligible as a use of force that must be contested. The subject-position produced by unresolved questions around this event is one closer to acquiescence, a subject-position which does not focus on the human costs of violence, to use Engels and Saas' phrasing, as being unacceptable on some ethical grounds. The reason for this is that the suspicion of state secrecy frames the strike as significant in terms of uncertainties over the rationale for secrecy and thus the state's covert power. This makes the public traces of the strike intelligible for newsreaders in terms of their being enigmatic: the rumours and speculation around this covert action are defined by their hinting at meaning, in terms of how and why this operation may have been conducted covertly, that remains out of reach. Unlike the photographs discussed by Ohl, these enigmatic traces do not cultivate disengagement on

the grounds of their opacity, but rather prompt witnesses to endlessly scrutinise them for meaning by focusing on the questions they implicitly raise, a position similar to the restless and inconclusive scrutiny that Santner identifies as being prompted by ruins (Santner, 2006: 80-1). Casualties are not represented as uncivilised threats justifying exceptionalist responses, but rather as being similarly enigmatic, their characteristics inferred from wider state rationalisations but then rendered uncertain by the destroyed objects and equivocal rumours that hint at secrecy. The meaning of the event is that it remains inconclusive.

These representations therefore do not shape an ethical orientation focused on the violence inflicted upon casualties; the human cost of these events is not represented as demanding ethical consideration. Suspected secrecy prompts a focus away from such consideration and towards uncertainties in the public record of the event and the state's covert capabilities.

Conclusion

This chapter has assessed previous literature on state secrecy, on how it is able to enter the public sphere and shape the representation of covert operations. Like these past analyses, this thesis argues that state secrecy is something that needn't simply restrict possibilities for representing state actions but can become part of and be ascribed characteristics within those representations. Covert operations can therefore exist as open secrets, events whose representation can indicate to witnesses that not everything has been revealed, and that what little is in the public domain is partial and difficult to substantiate. The present chapter parts from this previous literature, however, in arguing that the question of how such open secrecy might shape the representation of

state actions is distinguishable from the state's political rationale for secrecy. Whatever reasons a state may have for trying to keep some of its activities hidden from the public, those reasons need not determine how secrecy materialises in public discourse and shapes the meaning attached to covert events. While theories of state secrecy have asserted that state secrecy is instigated by the state and therefore furthers state objectives in its impact on public discourse, this chapter has argued that this is not an *a priori* proposition. What matters is *how* state secrecy is articulated.

In establishing this point of argument, the chapter examined past scholarship on the representation of covert action during the Cold War and in the aftermath of 11 September 2001. The chapter demonstrated that theories of covert action's representation locate the articulation of state secrecy in two representational elements: glimpses of covert agents carrying out violence and state invocations which contextualise those glimpses and pre-condition how witnesses are prompted to understand them. Through this combination, these past works argue that state secrecy is produced in a way that implies the state's rationale for that secrecy, an implicit narrative of why covertness is being used which represents the identities of the state and the targets of its violence. State invocations of secrecy prompt witnesses to see this rationale echoed in glimpses of covert action and thus to adopt an understanding of covert action which mirrors this rationale. In this way, state secrecy aligns the public's understanding with that of the perpetrators of covert violence, making witnesses complicit in the state's rationalisation of its actions. By identifying the presumption made in this literature about how state secrecy is articulated, this chapter has argued that the theory of state secrecy as fostering public assent does not hold in the case of contemporary operations. With the latter, state secrecy is a product of two new elements: public traces left in the wake of unseen covert violence; and silence from the state in response to

these traces. No glimpses of violence or state declarations in relation to these events circulate in the public sphere. It is unlikely that state secrecy produced in this way will prompt witnesses to adopt a discursive framework mirroring the state's rationale for covertness, as that rationale is not signified.

If state secrecy is not 'owned' by the state in this case, how does it shape the representation of contemporary covert counter-terrorism? The chapter concludes by analysing one recent example, a covert drone strike in Pakistan. The covertness of this strike is signified as a mere suspicion without any indication of the state rationale for its use. The chapter has argued that in the absence of this rationale, state secrecy can frame covert operations in ways that undermine or curtail the hegemony of a state rationalisation of its counter-terrorism. Firstly, the representation of a covert action through its public traces does not provide a glimpse of covert violence inflicted on bodies whose markers could then echo a state narrative for that violence. Secondly, the framing of these inconclusive claims by a suspicion of secrecy signifies the absence of a rationale for that secrecy. This signification implicitly highlights uncertainties in the public record of the event regarding the extent and purpose of the state's use of secrecy: who were the casualties of this action, what characteristics are significant, is the state obscuring their identities and why. The uncertainty over the rationale for covertness does not reiterate a narrative justifying state violence but instead curtails any wider rationalisation of counter-terrorism by signifying that it remains unclear whether the covert operation in question fits or echoes such a rationalisation. Yet while this representation of secrecy does not prompt public assent, it shapes a subject-position focused on the inconclusive and indecipherable quality of the public traces that remain of this covert event. That focus reflects something closer to acquiescence towards covert violence, a narrow ethical orientation whose focus is turned away from the violence that

is actually inflicted.

In critiquing past theories of state secrecy while raising this possibility of a subject-position beyond assent or dissent, the present chapter has introduced the dynamic that is central to the argument of the thesis: the interaction between secrecy and absence in representations of covert counter-terrorism. The chapter, however, has focused on the secrecy half of that dynamic, examining how state secrecy can be produced in the public sphere independent of the state and how its role in representations can be shaped by a state rationale, or lack thereof, for its use. This has allowed the chapter to demonstrate why the hegemony of state rationalisations cannot simply be presumed when analysing covert counter-terrorism. But the thesis intends to argue that a mere suspicion of state secrecy, without the state articulating a rationale for that secrecy, does not just produce secrecy in public discourse but acts to undermine it, by implicitly signifying ideas about that which is absent from these representations. These ideas, which the thesis conceptualises as intimations, produce meaning that exceeds the signification of an enigma; public traces are consequently represented not just as obscuring meaning but as being highly suggestive regarding absent people and objects related to these events. In order to theorise this production of excess meaning, the following chapter conceptualises the other half of this discursive dynamic, the absence that shapes and is shaped by secrecy.

Chapter 2

Smoke, blood, and silhouettes: residue and intimations of covert violence

As both the Introduction and the previous chapter have detailed, the continued rationalisation of state violence has usually been conceptualised in critical scholarship as a matter of an address, of the state addressing the public and prompting the latter to respond. That this scholarship is so often pitched as an investigation into state hegemony reveals an unspoken assumption: that public discourse is significantly, perhaps predominantly, pre-conditioned by the state, with the latter's addresses to the public setting the terms for understanding and even contesting state violence. The state address is always-already made, leaving witnesses only to respond, by assenting or dissenting. When state secrecy is considered, this analytic is echoed with secrecy functioning as the address made by the state. By examining how this analytic conceptualises state secrecy and testing its presumptions against contemporary covert action, the previous chapter challenged the idea that state secrecy need always be articulated by the state to the public. State secrecy can be signified not by state invocations but by the juxtaposition of sparse and speculative claims regarding an event that has neither been documented for the public nor acknowledged by the state. In making this argument, the chapter demonstrated that the hegemony of state discourses around its counter-terrorism cannot be presumed with covert practices: when signified as a mere possibility by the traces of an event, state secrecy may be represented to witnesses in ways that curtail any wider state rationalisation of such covert violence.

In critiquing the common critical notion that the representation of state

violence is necessarily pre-conditioned by the state, the previous article examined how open secrecy could gain meaning in the context of the state *not* articulating a rationale for that secrecy. The idea of a state rationale therefore anchored the argument of the previous chapter. But having established that such a rationale need not be reiterated in the public sphere when covert violence enters that sphere, this argument raises another question: if the state does not articulate a rationale for its possible use of secrecy, do representations of that secrecy make covert counter-terrorism meaningful in ways that go beyond the lack of rationale? Put differently, is the lack of a state rationale the most holistic way of understanding how covert counter-terrorism is represented? Having established that secrecy, when produced by rumours and debris left behind by covert action, need not belong to the state, there is no reason to think that this secrecy is ascribed meaning only with reference to this non-belonging; secrecy may be represented as having other characteristics dependent upon the traces that produce it. For this reason, the present chapter theorises the public traces of covert violence not in terms of a state rationale, as the previous chapter did, but on their own terms, by examining what those traces signify *over and above* the lack of an attempt to rationalise covertness.

By switching analytical focus in this way, the present chapter turns from conceptualising secrecy to conceptualising absences within the public traces of covert violence. As the chapter explains, contemporary covert counter-terrorism is represented through those things left in the wake of an event that has passed unseen – that is, where the event has not been documented to allow for co-present witnessing of the kind discussed in the Introduction. The chapter conceptualises these rumours, speculations and material debris left behind by covert action as residue, representational markers which signify that an event has passed unseen. It is these markers which

produce state secrecy as a mere suspicion. In signifying an action has passed unseen, however, these markers also materialise *absences* within the public sphere, namely the absence of people and objects implicated in this event and affected by it, including the casualties of these actions. Residue allows for the intersection of presence and absence in this way, with present residue referring to and thus signifying these absent traces as part of its meaning.

The present chapter details the dynamic between these absences and secrecy that lays the conceptual foundations for the argument of the thesis. When framed by a suspicion of secrecy, residue gains meaning as possible public evidence of an otherwise-covert event, as having escaped or avoided state secretion, without implying any state intentionality. As a result, the absences within that residue – as materialised through lacunae, ambiguities and contradictions in the rumours and debris left behind – also gain meaning as equivocal absences within the public record of a possibly-secret event. Having been made meaningful in this way, these absences signify that they leave different aspects of these events unresolved in the public sphere. Just as the state secrecy discussed in the previous chapter is equivocal when produced by residue, existing only as an inferred suspicion, so too are the absences within that residue: it remains indefinite what exactly is absent and why. Being part of the public traces of covert action, these equivocal absences therefore become *suggestive*: framed as having not been secreted by the state, these lacunae and ambiguities relating to absent people and objects are represented as possibly revealing things which secrecy would have otherwise kept obscured. This is why the thesis talks of residue as both producing *and undermining* state secrecy.

By juxtaposing a suspicion of state secrecy, the equivocal absences in residue implicitly signify suggestive but unverifiable ideas about the characteristics of that

which remains absent. The chapter conceptualises these implicit significations as intimations, significations from absence which exceed the explicit claims of news coverage and which can therefore reshape the meaning attached to these covert operations. Drawing on recent historiographies of colonial archives, the chapter proposes a method of reading for these intimations that identifies the lacunae and ambiguities of residue and examines how, when juxtaposed with a suspicion of state secrecy, they implicitly reshape the meaning that is explicitly signified by these news accounts.

In conceptualising how secrecy and absence together produce intimations, the chapter elaborates upon the idea of subject-positions towards state violence that go beyond assent or dissent. Because these absences remain equivocal, any intimations from them are similarly indefinite: the hints and allusions produced by these suggestive absences remain unverifiable possibilities, signified not by documentation of the event but by the fact that the public record in its aftermath is partial and unstable. Being suggestive but unverifiable, these intimations shape subject-positions towards state violence that neither rationalise that violence nor are motivated to contest it. Witnesses to residue are positioned towards the state in a more subtle and uncertain way, having been prompted to understand covert counter-terrorism in terms of possible but unverifiable characterisations of absent people and objects, and to consider what these unseen characteristics might reveal that secrecy would have otherwise obscured. Witnesses are not 'hailed' by a state rationalisation but are prompted to perceive intimations from that left behind by state violence.

There is nothing to guarantee, however, that intimations from residue will prompt witnesses to focus on those things which are intimated, to consider the ethical worth of absent casualties in relation to the state's use of violence. The intersection of

presence and absence may signify absentees, but it need not signify that the latter and their violation are central to the significance of the event for witnesses; intimations may shape the meaning of absences in ways that marginalise the ethical import of violence itself from the meaning of these operations. In order to trace how this dynamic of secrecy and absence shapes the representation not just of covert counter-terrorism but of those people who are absent, the chapter details the concept of historical affiliation. Drawing on the work of and on W.G. Sebald, the chapter argues that acts of violence can be linked to other seemingly-dissimilar historical acts of violence through their shared representational qualities of presence and absence; doing so allows the dynamic that shapes the meaning of absent traces in one representation to potentially highlight a similar dynamic in another that might not otherwise be analysable.

The chapter begins to build an historical affiliation between the residue of contemporary covert counter-terrorism and representations of lynching in the United States, based on their shared dynamics of presence and absence – namely, the public absence of the violated body – and constructions of distance between unseen violence and the wider public. As subsequent chapters elaborate, recent scholarship has demonstrated that national coverage of lynching, which drew on traces in the aftermath of the violence, represented the practice in different ways as spatially and morally distanced from society and as difficult to comprehend, shaping a narrow ethical orientation towards absent lynch victims. This historical affiliation is used in the analysis of covert counter-terrorism, to examine whether unseen violence is given similar meaning – not through explicit narrative, as with lynching, but through intimations from the suggestive absences of residue. This affiliation allows subsequent chapters to detail how witnesses are ethically oriented towards both the state and the absent casualties of these operations in ways that are obscured because remain

unspoken.

From enigmatic to suggestive: traces of unseen state violence

The covert counter-terrorism under review does not materialise in public through documentation of these operations being undertaken. Instead, these operations are represented through text and images of the markers left in their wake, that signify these operations have occurred without being witnessed by the public. These markers can take many forms: plumes of smoke rising into the air; smouldering rubble of destroyed buildings or the burn-out chassis of vehicles; diverse objects and marks on the landscape left behind by covert agents; bullet holes and blood scattered across the walls and floors of empty rooms; indistinct, poor-quality photographs and video footage; contradictory eye-witness statements and rumours of what took place; unofficial insights and speculation into the general operational dynamics presumed to be behind such operations; and conspicuous unanswered questions regarding what exactly took place. When represented alongside the claim that a covert operation has occurred, these phenomena signify their *dissimilarity* from the claimed event – plumes of smoke do not appear to show the unfolding of a covert operation but its aftermath. As such, these markers signify that the operation has already occurred. In materialising a covert operation in public, they signify that the people and objects who constituted the event itself are now absent.

The previous chapter demonstrated that these markers of a covert event's aftermath juxtapose a conspicuous silence from the state, a non-acknowledgement of the event and its apparent traces, and that this produces a suspicion of state secrecy, without a state rationale for this possible covertness. While the previous chapter argued

that this suspicion of secrecy represents covert action as enigmatic in terms of this absent rationale, traces of a covert operation can signify more than lost or inaccessible meaning when framed by such secrecy. These further significations depend upon the traces themselves, their various forms and characteristics as described above; not only do they shape how secrecy is represented, they shape how absences among these remainders materialise in the public sphere.

An extended example demonstrates how the qualities of these traces shape the representational dynamics of covert action. On 15 October 2014 a drone was reported to have fired missiles at a car in Shabwa province, Yemen. *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism* (2014) has noted that the Yemeni defence ministry reported the name of one person killed in the car, Mahdi Badas, and identified him as a local al Qaeda leader, while three other people were also reported killed by local sources. A *Reuters* report of the attack went no further than to state, in the middle of a wider report on militant violence in Yemen: “Also on Wednesday, residents and a local official said a drone strike hit a car carrying suspected al Qaeda militants in Shabwa province. The car was completely burnt and destroyed” (*Reuters*, 2014). A Twitter feed run by data artist Josh Begley, 'Dronestream', reported the attack with an accompanying photograph seemingly taken from a mobile phone at the scene of the strike (Begley, 2014; Figure 2). The image shows the burnt-out chassis of a car with a flaming front-right tyre, motionless in a flat landscape and surrounded only by an expanse of sand and a small sparse crowd of onlookers. The clear sky is punctuated only by birds flying overhead and some trees and mountains on the horizon in the far distance.



Figure 2: Reported photograph of U.S. drone strike on 15 October 2014 in Shabwa province, Yemen (Begley, 2014).

In order to demonstrate the representational dynamics at work in this image of

a drone strike, it can be contrasted with another image that at first seem aesthetically and contextually similar. The Israeli military assault on the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2014 was extensively documented by journalists. The *Daily Mail* published online articles filled with photographs of the air assault. One such article contained a photograph captioned by the statement: “Smoke and fire from the explosion of an Israeli strike rise over Gaza City as Israel continued its bombardment of the besieged territory today” (Reilly and Gayle, 2014; Figure 3). The image shows dozens of tightly-packed buildings viewed from a high angle and from a distance, with two dark billows of smoke and a ball of fire towering over those buildings on the near horizon and reaching high into the clear sky.



Figure 3: Photograph of reported Israeli air strike in Gaza City on 22 July 2014 (Reilly and Gayle, 2014).

Aesthetically, the two images have many similarities. Formally, they both centre on a cluster of fire with smoke rising from it, the destruction emphasised by standing out against a seemingly calm sky. In both cases, the smoke rises towards the edge of the frame, encouraging viewers to follow its drift towards the empty horizon. Finally, in neither image are the casualties of the strike *visibly* present. There is no blood, no torn limbs. But as the previous chapter discussed, the representational economy within which covert action traces circulate is crucial, and the contextualisation of each photograph by accompanying news accounts shapes the materialisation of each photographed site, of *what* is being shown, giving different meaning to each strike.

The image of the Israeli strike is framed in the news article as a glimpse of an ongoing bombardment: Israel is described as “continu[ing] to devastate the Gaza Strip with air strikes and artillery today” as its “warplanes bombarded a wide range of targets along the densely populated coastal strip” (ibid). The image, then, is framed as *showing* the ongoing event of an *unfolding* military action, as being spatially and temporally ‘in the middle’ of that action. The relation between the image and the event is therefore likely to be clear and unambiguous for newsreaders: the image documents the event as it is happening. This framing figures the image as eventful, in the sense used by Frosh and Pinchevski, whereby the capturing of a moment on media allows it to be subsequently represented (via its endless playback or recall) as revealing a significant event that was inadvertently documented. By being framed as showing an unfolding Israeli military operation, the billowing fire and smoke in the image are transformed from “merely incidental” aspects of a captured moment to “singularly significant” elements of an event that is revealed *through* them (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2014: 599). The image is therefore signified as eventful.

By contrast, the image of the burnt-out car is simply contextualised in the tweet

by the statement that “Four people were killed when U.S. drone missiles struck a Toyota Hilux” (Begley, 2014). The tweet links to a *Xinhua* article reporting that “Four suspected al-Qaida fighters were killed Wednesday in a U.S. drone strike”, with a local security official quoted as saying the “air raid” had “targeted small pick-up truck [sic]” and “kill[ed] four people inside”. The car is reported to have been “travelling in the Bin Aasf village in Shabwa province, where the al-Qaida group has a strong presence” (*Xinhua*, 2014). This framing articulates some speculative notions of the identity and behaviour of the people targeted by the strike and emphasises the physical action of missiles hitting a material object. The accompanying texts also figure the strike as an event that has now ended. Against this framing, the image emphasises its *dissimilarity* with the purported event: there is little sense of impactful movement within this space, of objects hitting one another; the behaviour of the surrounding people suggests a lack of ongoing danger, at least so far as they are aware; and the markings of violence, in the form of the chassis and smoke, seem slight and exceptional against an otherwise unremarkable, undynamic scene. Presented as evidence of a strike, the image signifies a lack of eventfulness, that it has not captured potentially-significant details of an event but a moment that lacks expected qualities of such details, one that therefore cannot provide a “visual narrativisation” of the strike through its recall (Ohl, 2015: 621). Instead, the image represents and so materialises a site of traces, material marks of an event that has passed unseen within this space.

There is nothing in this image or its accompanying text that explicitly indicates the significance or otherwise of these traces in relation to the event. With that event having passed and the image appearing uneventful, the latter is figured as arbitrary, as showing just whatever happened to have been left behind by the action. But the respective eventfulness and uneventfulness of the two images under discussion are also

shaped by the two representations' respective qualities of overtness and secrecy, and it is this which allows the drone strike image to gain significance.

The image of smoke billowing from a crowded Gaza neighbourhood is accompanied by articulations of the motivation and purpose of the Israeli military operation. Israel is described as having “launched a massive aerial bombardment of Gaza on July 8 to stop relentless Hamas rocket fire into Israel”, while Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is described as “urg[ing] the international community to hold Hamas accountable for the latest round of violence, saying its refusal to agree to a cease-fire had prevented an earlier end to the fighting” (Reilly and Gayle, 2014). By noting the state's own avowed rationale for the operation, this representation characterises the operation as *overt*, as being openly admitted to and justified by the Israeli government. No state secrecy is articulated. The air strike image is therefore figured as showing this event without obscuration; nothing in the overall representation prompts newsreaders to think that the image is incomplete on the terms set by its framing, that some part of 'what is happening' is being kept from the public sphere. Newsreaders may themselves think that there is something being obscured by the Israeli state – say, the true cost of Palestinian lives lost – but the image and text combined do nothing to prompt such thoughts. Consequently, while anyone killed or injured by the strike are not visually displayed in the image, their spatial co-presence is signified through the framing of this image as showing an unfolding, unobscured public event. The people who may well be casualties are represented as spatially and temporally present for witnesses: they *are there*, in those buildings and on those streets. They are part of the meaning of what takes place in the image.

Undoubtedly, the image of the burnt-out car in Shabwa province invites viewers to think of the casualties of the drone strike, to imagine their likely fate in that

hollowed-out husk of the vehicle. But while the accompanying news report states the strike as a matter of fact, that four people “were killed” and that the strike had been “confirmed”, details are given by a “local security official” who spoke to the news agency “on condition of anonymity” (*Xinhua*, 2014). There is no articulated U.S. state acknowledgement of the strike, no demand for the public to look away or refusal to confirm or deny its occurrence (to follow the schema of the previous chapter). This silence and anonymity juxtapose the sparseness of details that have been documented only in the aftermath of the strike. That juxtaposition signifies a suspicion of state secrecy, the equivocal suggestion that the unseen event was a secret kept by the state from the public, but without any accompanying notion of the state rationale for trying to keep it secret.

This implicit suggestion that not everything about the event may have been publicly revealed casts a different light on the uneventfulness of the image. While that uneventfulness signifies the arbitrariness of these traces in their having been left in the wake of the strike, the suspicion of state secrecy signifies that these traces are significant *precisely because* they appear arbitrary. Figured as public traces of an event that has otherwise been kept secret, the burnt-out chassis and billowing smoke are implicitly characterised as *not* having been successfully secreted by the state, without implying any state desire or attempt to do so. These traces gain meaning in relation to that suspicion of covertness and thus appear not insignificant but suggestive: this representation signifies that having escaped secretion, these traces possibly reveal things about the event which covertness would have otherwise obscured – again, not because those traces would have all been hidden by the state, but because their relationship to a covert action might have remained unknown. This representation therefore materialises a space which appears significant in that it exists and has been identified in the public

sphere beyond the control of the state perpetrator. This suggestiveness prompts witnesses to see the image as significant not in relation to the inaccessible past, the event that cannot be replayed, but in relation to the *present state* of these traces. The traces no longer appear simply enigmatic.

The suspicion that these traces have escaped state secretion now shapes new significations. The accompanying text in the tweet defines the strike by its supposed targets: “Oct 15, 2014: Four people were killed when U.S. drone missiles struck a Toyota Hilux (Yemen)” (Begley, 2014). With these traces framed as public evidence of an otherwise-hidden event, these four people are now conspicuous in their absence. Unlike in the image of the Israeli air strike, where casualties are characterised as present in what is shown, markers of casualties and their identities are implicitly signified as absent from the public remainders of this covert strike. The suspicion of secrecy therefore highlights that this public evidence cannot establish the identities of these absent casualties. The suggestiveness of these traces, as possible public evidence of covert action, prompts witnesses to scrutinise the image for evidence of those who were killed, to look for their bodies among the car wreckage. But in constituting the site of these four people's covert deaths, the burnt-out chassis is represented as inscrutable: not only does the decrepit state of the wreckage make distinguishing bodies seem a difficult task, but the fire and smoke suggest the evidence of the strike is dissipating, that these traces and anything they may reveal about the strike may not last much longer. Secrecy and absence therefore implicitly signify the possibility that whatever remains of this operation in the public sphere will not be enough to reveal the identities of those killed.

The news report linked to in the tweet continues to explicitly define the strike by those killed, but the suspicion of secrecy now reshapes what is articulated. While the headline states that the strike 'kill[ed] 4 al-Qaida militants in SE Yemen', the first line

states they were “[f]our *suspected* al-Qaida fighters”. The anonymous official elaborates: “The air raid was conducted by a U.S. drone plane which targeted small pick-up truck [sic] in the Shabwa province, *killing four people inside* who are suspected to be members of al-Qaida terrorist group”. The car, meanwhile, is reported to have been “travelling in the Bin Aasf village in Shabwa province, *where the al-Qaida group has a strong presence*” (Xinhua, 2014, emphases added). While these statements attach terroristic identities and behaviour to those killed, allowing the representation to potentially resonate with a wider state narrative rationalising counter-terrorism, these statements are juxtaposed both by a suspicion of state secrecy and by the photograph of the wrecked vehicle. This juxtaposition highlights the speculative and equivocal quality of the statements, that these people's identities remain unverified in the non-state public record of this secret event and cannot be confirmed by the inscrutable traces which are possibly all that remain. As part of a representation of a state action, this juxtaposition also prompts newsreaders to consider that the criteria by which the strike was conducted are *not* in the public sphere. The image of the burnt chassis signifies that witnesses have not seen *how* the purported targets were identified and tracked down, and that these public traces cannot establish that the people who died inside the car shown *were* the speculated targets. As public evidence that has avoided secretion, this wreckage and the absence of markers of casualties within this space signify the suggestive idea that it remains uncertain how anyone inside that vehicle could have been identified before or after targeting. This idea is signified as inconclusive, its implications unverifiable, but it nonetheless shapes the meaning of the representation.

What happens in the case of this image, then, is that absences in these visible traces of a possibly-secret event produce unverifiable ideas about what *isn't* visible. As public evidence of covert action, these traces prompt witnesses to be curious about

those absences, about the identities of those killed and the mechanisms that led to their deaths. So while the casualties of the Israeli air strike were represented as being part of the unproblematic and comprehensible meaning of what the image showed, the casualties of this drone strike are signified as *absences* in the public sphere that *change* the meaning of what the image shows.

This analysis of two aesthetically similar photographs, one of an overt and unfolding event, the other of a covert and passed event, demonstrates that the public traces of contemporary covert counter-terrorism need not just signify their being enigmatic. Instead, by being made significant in having avoided state secretion, they can signify ideas about the characteristics of those things which are absent from the public aftermath of that event. Traces of covert action therefore both produce state secrecy in the public sphere and implicitly undercut that secrecy by hinting at details of the operation in ways that the state's covertness would have otherwise curtailed. Two conceptual questions are raised by this analysis: how to theorise the materialisation of absence in the public sphere; and how to understand these implicit significations of ideas about that which is absent, ideas which can change the meaning of what is articulated by a representation while remaining inconclusive and unverifiable. Answering these questions will lead towards a conceptualisation of the subject-positions produced by these suggestive absences.

Theorising residue and its absences

A number of aspects of this comparative example help to theorise covert action's traces and the representational dynamics that they inculcate. The first thing that seems significant, in terms of how covert counter-terrorism is represented, is that these traces

signify that they are markers not of the event itself but its aftermath. In his discussion of the concept of an event, François Dosse notes the event's seemingly paradoxical existence: it refers both to a rupture in time, an unexpected occurrence, and to the outcome of a causal chain (Dosse, 2015: 29). This paradox reveals that events are constituted by human beings through the linking together of different phenomena into a narrative; emerging through this narrative linkage, an event can then be juxtaposed to other events in terms of differences and similarities, that is, the event's unexpectedness and its causal connections (ibid: 38-9). Representations of covert action which draw on the traces of an operation do narrate events in this way, but crucially they do so by stating an event took place and then providing representational markers (text and images) that seem *uneventful* in Frosh and Pinchevski's (2014) sense: these markers emphasise their dissimilarity from the expected qualities and dynamics of the event itself. In the above example, the textual framing of the image of a burnt-out chassis signifies that the image has not captured a drone strike as it unfolds. The texts and materials that enact this representational dynamic, when mediated and contextualised in news coverage, can be conceptualised as *residue* of covert violence: markers of the aftermath of a covert action which, through their uneventfulness, signify to witnesses that the event itself has passed unseen.

A conceptual comparison can be used to gauge the analytical purchase of this concept of residue. The conclusion of the previous chapter, that these representations prompt witnesses to focus on the seemingly enigmatic character of these traces of covert violence, invites a comparison with the concept of ruins. As the decaying remainders of objects which point to the inaccessible past for their meaning, ruins have been conceptualised as enigmatic signifiers, as artefacts which hint at lived symbolic orders that once gave them meaning but without revealing what those orders were

(Santner, 2006: 16-17). Ruins stand as fragments of a lost symbolic order. By signifying that lost meaning, ruins have been thought to represent the transience of human existence, the permanent threat to society's complacent pomposity from an indifferent natural world (Pensky, 2010: 67-9). Were traces of covert violence to gain meaning in this way, they would risk being devolved of their political context, the violent events that produced them, and turned into generalised emblems of the inaccessibility of a past "radically cut off from the present" (Middeke and Wald, 2011: 13). They would remain enigmatic.

But covert action traces are not reducible to relics of once-whole objects that were implicated in the event itself. The smoke and fire emanating from the car, for instance, are not remnants but *new* material, or seemingly less-than-material, markers produced by the event. Most importantly, the burnt-out chassis in the Shabwa strike example does not signify, through its gradual deterioration, the decline of a symbolic order or society that in the past was built around this object (DeSilvey and Edensor, 2012: 471). These traces do refer to a covert action that has been and gone, but insodoing they signify the *continued existence* of relations of people and objects which carried out that action and left these traces, namely the agents and technologies of state foreign policy violence. These traces refer to the present as well as the past for their meaning.

While those state relations and practices may not have vanished into the past, they nonetheless remain unseen in these representations. This points to a key conceptual element of residue, the intersection of presence and absence that residue produces. While the invisibility of any people in the image of the Israeli air strike might intuitively preclude them from being represented, presence-absence is not a zero-sum characteristic. Both are multifaceted categories: something can be absent in one sense

while simultaneously being present in another sense. The invisibility or seeming immateriality of a thing, understood as a visual and corporeal lack that prevents any potential physical interaction, need not rule out that object or person possessing other kinds of presence, as in the spatial presence of casualties in the streets and buildings under Israeli bombardment (see Buchli, 2010: 186-7). As noted in the Introduction, co-presence with witnesses needn't involve spatial proximity; a representation can prompt witnesses to be imaginatively present at the scene represented (Frosh, 2009: 58-60). That which is invisible can therefore gain co-presence with witnesses as well, as part of that scene.

But as the Shabwa strike image indicates, just as different degrees of presence are possible, so too are different degrees of absence which can themselves materialise through representational practices. Absence can be signified through witnesses' sensorial engagement with markers that *are* present, if the latter are represented as intelligible *through* something else which cannot be engaged with in the same way. Like the remains of the dead, traces of past activities “bear the imprint[s]” of what has passed and can signify “chains of associations” to absent people and objects (T. Keenan and Weizman, 2012: 18, 65). Worn-down objects understood as having particular purposes or uses can point in this way to the people and activities once associated with them that are now materially and temporally absent (Edensor, 2005: 327-30). No degree of presence or absence is essential or exclusive to one or the other: materiality or visibility might signify absence (the temporal absence of someone pictured in an old photograph, for instance), while immateriality might signify presence (as in the metaphysical presence of God). Absence, in this sense, has a “relational ontology”, materialising through representational practices that give objects presence and allow those objects to then “give absence matter” (Meyer, 2012: 107). In the case of covert action, residue

which is co-present to witnesses – that is, which is represented 'as if' witnesses were present with it, prompting that imagining – signifies the spatial, visual and material absence of those state relations noted above: bullet holes indicate a firefight that was not witnessed; the smoke drifting from a wrecked building alludes to that which set the house alight.

But the absence of state mechanisms of violence is given particular meaning in the Shabwa strike case: they appear to remain hidden, to have been kept from the public by the state. To understand the production of absence here, it is therefore necessary to conceptualise residue as materialising not just the aftermath of state violence, but a suspicion of state secrecy. These traces do not just indicate that an event has passed, but through conspicuous qualifications and lacunae signify that this event is possibly a secret the state has been trying to keep from the public. The comparative example above suggests that this suspicion of secrecy alters the meaning of residue: the latter is framed by that secrecy as public evidence of an operation which has otherwise been obscured from public view. Rumours and speculation about the event, along with material traces at the site of passed violence, thus gain significance in existing and having been identified in the public sphere outwith the articulations or control of the state. Indeed, because this rumour and debris appear dissimilar from presumed qualities of the unseen event, and because many of them appear at risk of altering or disappearing (consider rusting wreckage or dissipating smoke), they signify that their relation to the event is not self-evident but precarious, that they need to be linked to that event through journalistic effort. When framed by secrecy, residue is therefore represented as significant because it exists outside of state articulations, because it has been documented independent of representations by the state perpetrator.

Through this representation, lacunae, ambiguities and contradictions within

that residue gain similar significance. Framed as non-state markers of otherwise-covert actions, they are represented as questioning or leaving unresolved the characteristics of people and objects which are not co-present in this residue and therefore appear absent from the public sphere. With details of those people and objects remaining unclear, these absences materialise and gain significance as being equivocal and ambiguous (Meier et al, 2013: 425-7): with no confirmation and documentation to hand of that which is absent, it remains unclear *what* exactly is absent, as does the precise nature of that absence – whether something is simply not among the traces that have been identified, or if it no longer exists, or has been secreted or destroyed. Having avoided state secretion, these equivocal absences are represented as significant in leaving the public record of 'what happened in secret' inconclusive and even incoherent, depending upon how different traces reflect upon one another through these absences.

By appearing equivocal in this way, residue and its absences become *suggestive*. Because these public traces of possibly-covert events exist and are identified independent of state articulations, they signify that they may potentially reveal things about the event which the state's covertness would have otherwise prevented being articulated in the public sphere. Moreover, the precariousness of the link between this residue and the event represents the former as significant in the present moment, while that link is still evident. Through this precarious suggestiveness, residue is represented to witnesses as worthy of attention and scrutiny, in terms of what it might reveal. Absences within that residue are represented similarly: by leaving residue unable to reveal or corroborate certain details of what has taken place, these absences render those details ambiguous and gain significance in terms of what their equivocal quality *could* indicate about an otherwise-secret event. This is what allows the image of the burnt car chassis in Shabwa province to reshape the meaning of statements on those

targeted. That chassis is framed by suspected secrecy as having escaped secretion and been identified in the public sphere. As a result, it is represented as significant in its inscrutability, in its being unable to confirm details of the event, since it does not offer markers of the targets' claimed terrorist identities at the site where they were killed. The absence of casualties therefore gains materiality and meaning as producing incongruity in the public evidence of the covert strike.

Intimations from absence

It is one thing for smoke exuding from car wreckage to hint at a missile strike, or even its probable casualties; it is quite another for that smoke to implicitly suggest ideas about that strike in relation to things which are not present. What does it mean, then, to say that the residue of a covert operation such as the Shabwa strike can hint at characteristics of absent people and objects?

This ability is firstly a consequence of residue's suggestiveness. With residue represented as worthy of scrutiny, and its absences represented as leaving that residue unable to confirm aspects of the event, residue prompts witnesses to consider what the lacunae, ambiguities and contradictions that reflect these absences might suggest about the unseen covert operation. Suggestion here is a matter of relevant possibility. At the same time that residue is made significant in having escaped state secretion, it is represented as unstable in terms of the visibility and clarity of its link to the event that produced it. So long as the state's use of covertness remains unconfirmed and documentation of the event is not forthcoming, these public traces are indefinite in terms of how exactly they relate to the claimed state action, what exactly they prove or disprove beyond the apparent use of state violence and suspected secrecy. But because it

does nonetheless exist in the public sphere and has seemingly avoided secretion, residue is represented as allowing for certain unverifiable possibilities. The significance and yet inconclusiveness of these traces is what together allow them to implicitly signify ideas about absent people and objects. By appearing worthy of scrutiny, residue prompts witnesses to consider what it *possibly* reveals about an unseen event, what its equivocal absences *could* indicate that nonetheless remains unverifiable. These possibilities are not the product of witnesses' independent speculation; they are signified *to* witnesses by these representations because of the way absences materialise in relation to secrecy.

The quality of these significations, however, requires further reflection. For in the comparative example above, the unverifiable ideas about the absent casualties of the drone strike in Shabwa province are not explicitly articulated in the representation. They are produced by that representation without being reducible to its explicit articulations: they are not spoken by a political actor, articulated by the journalist, or visualised in the image of the smoking vehicle.

In order to identify these implicit significations and demonstrate the analytical worth of the ideas presented in this chapter, the thesis turns to recent colonial historiography which has attempted to study unspoken allusions in colonial archives and literature. Using this work, the thesis conceptualises implicit and unverifiable significations through the notion of intimation. Intimation is used here in a play on its double meaning. Intimacy normally refers to the closeness involved in certain social relationships, a proximity of bodies that engenders familiarity. Different intimacies offer actors the opportunity to define those relationships through categories of difference: the contrasting appearance and behaviour of bodies in close contact can be used as supposed evidence of different types of race, sex, sexuality and class. As products of intimacy, however, those claims of separateness are always precarious, prone to being

undone by the “awkward familiarities” and “unsolicited attentions” that such proximity often engenders (Stoler, 2006: 15-16). This unintended miscegenation overlays this notion of intimacy with the verb to intimate, the latter meaning indirect communication, to hint or allude to something without stating it explicitly. The relationships developed between bodies in close proximity might intimate that categories of difference are not so clear-cut, that different supposed 'types' may not have essential and exclusive traits.

This concept of intimation as meaning produced *in excess* of what is explicitly articulated can be elaborated through the work of Michelle Aung Thin, who draws on the double meaning discussed above to examine the discursive power of skin, specifically the skin of the Anglo-Burmese female protagonist in F. Tennyson Jesse's *The Lacquer Lady*, a novel set on the brink of the British reunification of Burma. The ability of Fanny Moroni to move between social circles of the coloniser and the colonised, that is, her perceived ambiguous and shifting social standing, reveals that skin can signify more than is intended of it by colonial categories of difference. For while those categories may separate 'European' from 'Burmese' by associating certain bodies with certain behaviours and thus cultural competencies – designating who can reach 'European' status – the skin of a person can allude to the possibility of those two identities coexisting in one body, or of either of those identities being insecure, by appearing to decouple bodies and thus identities from their expected behaviours and competencies. This excess meaning “stretches the idea of skin and what may or may not be contained within it. It connects to and stands in for other skins (where skin delineates the limit of or is a metaphor for a subject). Through this continuous allusion, this contingency, it complicates rather than clarifies difference” (Aung Thin, 2013: 74).

This double meaning of intimacy captures how the allusions from the Shabwa

strike's residue were not the product of any one public trace, but were the result of that smoking wreckage being explicitly linked to a passed covert operation. Through that linkage, the image emphasised its inability to corroborate or reveal aspects of the unseen event, due to equivocal absences in these traces. News coverage thus signified a connection between present and absent traces of the operation that reshaped the meaning of what was explicitly stated about casualties. Here the idea of intimacy is taken beyond notions of physical proximity (Stoler, 2006: 15; Pain and Staeheli, 2014: 344-6) and expanded to apply across degrees of presence and absence, so that two things can have intimacy while differing in the kinds of presence and absence they each hold. Present residue can signify its intimacy with absent people and objects and so allow the absence that materialises as a result to produce excess meaning about the event that fostered this intimacy, meaning in excess of what those visible traces themselves explicitly articulate.

Applied to the comparative example, intimation makes conceptual sense of the intuitive differences between these two representations and the subject-positions they might produce, despite their similar visual aesthetics of the effects of missile strikes. Were analysis to focus only on the explicit articulations in these news accounts, those things stated and visualised which construct these accounts, these two examples would appear to produce similar meanings. Both accounts state that a strike occurred and ascribe identities to the targets; and while neither report visualises those targets as proof of these identities, nor do they explicitly draw attention to that visual lack. Moreover, while one event is characterised as ongoing and the other as something that has passed unseen, this does not seem to affect the way each event is represented. But to restrict analysis to these explicit significations is to ignore how secrecy and absence can be signified and gain materiality without being spoken out loud. Any intimations produced

as a result can shape the subject-positions towards residue: by signifying unverifiable ideas about that which is absent, intimations position witnesses of residue in relation to both the state perpetrator and absentees; like more explicit discursive practices, intimations “structure our encounters with other human beings in space and time” (Campbell, 2007: 361), even if those beings are absent. If one does not presume from the outset the hegemony of state rationalisations of its actions, then secrecy and absence appear able in principle to prompt witnesses to understand unseen events in ways that are not determined by explicit articulations alone.

In the case of the Shabwa strike, material and less-than-material traces were used by journalists to construct a news story of a strike, with journalists 'translating' these traces into representational markers by articulating them in coverage. The photograph of a charred vehicle is framed as the public remainders of a missile strike and so signifies its connection to those things left unseen and unaccounted for in these traces, the targets of the strike and the state mechanisms that enacted it. But having been represented as public evidence of covert action, these traces signify that their lacunae and ambiguities leave unresolved certain aspects of this event. This residue acts analogously to the skin described above: while some of this residue explicitly articulates that four al-Qaeda militants were killed in the strike, the car wreckage is framed by secrecy and so alludes to its inscrutability, its inability to confirm these identities. In that ambiguity, this residue intimates the possibility that these identities have not been proven and might not be what has been claimed. Qualifications that those targeted were *suspected* of being terrorists are similarly highlighted by the suspicion of secrecy, allowing that residue to allude to the operating mechanisms of these covert drone strikes, intimating that they remain unknown, possibly secreted, and that therefore it remains unclear how those mechanisms could identify potential and then successful

targets. These intimations thus reshaped the meaning of what was explicitly articulated about the strike, by representing this residue as significant in terms of the unverifiable possibilities it suggested.

By allowing for the possibility of excess meaning that reshapes what is explicitly stated, this concept of intimation pushes analysis of representations beyond an assumption that any new sensory phenomena in the world – such as the public traces that witnesses encounter through news coverage – are inevitably reinscribed and 'contained' within the explicit signifiers used to articulate social reality. This assumption implies that alterity, that which witnesses encounter as new and unfamiliar, is made comprehensible for witnesses within chains of signification that journalists articulate to produce news reports. As Rey Chow argues, this “epistemic framework” presumes the inevitable success of this reinscription, suggesting that anything which “appears to lie ‘outside’” a chain of signification already comprehensible to witnesses – such as a state narrative of terrorism vs. counter-terrorism – is “continually recoded” within such chains and becomes meaningful on their terms (Chow, 2006: 62). That which is new and unfamiliar about these people, objects or events is recoded into signifiers whose alterity is already meaningful in relation to other signifiers – 'al-Qaeda' in differentiation from 'United States', for instance (ibid: 67). In sum, this framework does not allow for unfamiliar events to signify in excess of the articulations used to try to make them intelligible. By contrast, the concept of intimation acknowledges this possibility of excess meaning, and insodoing avoids the presumption that where explicit signifiers echo state rationales, events will necessarily become meaningful for witnesses through those rationales.

Because intimations are a product of explicit signifiers but are not reducible to their explicit meanings, they pose a methodological as well as a conceptual challenge. In

her work on colonial archives and the intimacies left unspoken in them, Lisa Lowe has elaborated a methodology of reading for significations that are produced by absences within a representation's explicit articulations. The intimacies that interest Lowe, between Chinese indentured labourers and slaves in nineteenth-century British Caribbean colonies, were actively discouraged by the British colonial government, and as a result they are rarely explicitly detailed in the various documents and records of colonial governance in the Caribbean. But although those intimacies "[are] not explicitly named in the documents", they are "paradoxically, everywhere present in the archive" in the form of "rhetorical ellipses" or "the rhetorical peculiarities of the documents, the places where particular figures, tropes or circumlocutions are repeated to cover gaps or tensions" (Lowe, 2015: 35). Intimacies between indentured contractors, indigenous people and slaves "are referenced by negative means, in cautionary rhetorics and statements of prohibition"; these hints at such interactions implicitly signify the colonisers' awareness and fear of "racial proximity in a context of mixture and unstable boundaries", namely the social boundaries of difference that were supporting colonial rule (ibid: 34). Lowe conceptualises these implicit significations as residual intimacies, which "continue, but are less legible" in the aftermath of the social practices that constituted them (ibid: 19). This resonates with the concept of residue that signifies connections between present and absent traces in the wake of a covert event.

Building on Lowe's methodology, this thesis analyses the residue of covert counter-terrorism by tracing the ellipses and peculiarities within that residue which materialise absence, the lacunae, ambiguities and contradictions that relate to people and objects not present in these representations. By tracing these ellipses and how they are made conspicuous and ascribed meaning by a suspicion of state secrecy, analysis can detail how the ambiguities of residue intimate ideas about that which is absent. These

intimations can then be compared to the explicit articulations made about these covert operations, in order to establish how the former are likely to reshape the meanings produced by the latter. This methodology is how the intimations from the Shabwa strike residue were identified: the representation was examined first for significations that would produce a suspicion of secrecy, and second for ambiguities and contradictions that spoke to absent people and objects; the analysis then examined how that suspected secrecy would reflect on those incongruities that are consequently highlighted as ellipses in the public evidence of 'what happened' in secret. The analysis examined what those incongruities now allowed for in terms of unverifiable ideas about that which is absent, what the ambiguity of this residue would suggest as possible about absent casualties or targeting mechanisms. By comparing these implicit significations with those explicitly articulated by the news coverage, the analysis demonstrated how the former reshapes the meaning produced by the latter. This analysis captures significations that would otherwise be ignored, and therefore allows for a more accurate understanding of the subject-positions that are likely to be produced by this coverage.

Historical affiliations of residue

In order to understand how residue positions witnesses relative to both the state perpetrator and casualties of covert counter-terrorism, it is not enough to trace the intimations made by this residue. While this analysis can demonstrate how unverifiable possibilities are signified to witnesses and change the meanings attached to these events, identifying these hints and allusions does not necessarily reveal how that which is alluded to is *itself* represented. Whether discussing physical proximity or relations across presence and absence, intimacy can affect how *all* parties to it are understood by others. Intimacy is not an instrument wielded by one actor against another but a social

relation extending beyond any actor's agency, which can produce excess meaning regarding all the people and objects involved. The problem in the case of covert counter-terrorism is that one half of the intimacy being posited is absent from these representations. When residue hints at the covert agents involved, the weaponry used, the networks that enact these operations, and those at the receiving end of the violence, markers of these absent things are not being 'unearthed' from documentation of 'what really happened'. But witnesses are nonetheless prompted by these absences to consider possibilities regarding those absent people and objects, and as such witnesses are positioned in relation to those things. Any analysis of the subject-positions produced by residue must therefore analyse how witnesses are prompted to understand the importance or significance of absent people and objects to the meanings of these events. This means examining how that which remains unspoken bears on that which is absent – a further methodological challenge.

The thesis proposes to meet this challenge by placing covert counter-terrorism in an historical affiliation with acts of violence possessing similar representational qualities. The justification here is that just as absences in a representation are highlighted to witnesses through juxtaposition – the contrast between the idea of a violent action and the uneventfulness of what is used to report on it – so the way representations implicitly frame the significance of those absent can be revealed through juxtaposition, by comparing that representation with another. This comparison can highlight discursive dynamics that have been identified in one representation but are obscured in the other by remaining unspoken. Without this juxtaposition, discursive dynamics might go unnoticed by becoming naturalised in a representation, since they may attach meanings to absent people and objects in way that are implicit rather than explicitly articulated, and are not drawn to witnesses' attention. Representational

markers might therefore instigate wider processes of meaning-making while leaving unsaid and unacknowledged how that meaning is contingent upon implicit ideas or presumptions.

But it is not just any comparison that can reveal these processes. Comparison provides the most evidence of such dynamics when based upon shared representational qualities. Moreover, by highlighting representational dynamics that otherwise are not signified within the terms of the representation itself, such a juxtaposition can focus the *ethical stakes* of witnessing in this case. Juxtaposition can highlight unexamined understandings perpetuated by these representations and how they shape witnesses' ethical consideration of different aspects of an event. As the Conclusion will elaborate, the use of historical affiliation is as much normative as methodological: it proposes different ways of judging the ethics of witnessing.

In unpacking this concept of historical affiliation, and in order to demonstrate its analytical value for covert counter-terrorism, the thesis turns to narrative strategies identified in the work of W.G. Sebald. As discussed in the Introduction, Sebald's prose fiction is concerned with comprehending the continuing presence of tangible and less tangible debris that results from manifold destructive episodes in human and natural history, debris which resonates with the empirical focus of this thesis: from ruins, to recounted memories, to glimpses of smoke and dust across landscapes. Sebald's prose work *The Rings of Saturn* arguably best exemplifies this focus. The narrator of *Rings* recounts a 1992 walking trip along a thirty-odd mile stretch of coast in the south-eastern English county of Suffolk. For the narrator, this walk is designed to “[dispel] the emptiness that takes hold of me whenever I have completed a long stint of work”; and while “[his] hope was realised, up to a point”, he admits to a “paralysing horror that had come over me at various times when confronted with the traces of destruction, reaching

far back into the past, that were evident even in that remote place” (Sebald, 2002: 3). The subsequent narration details not just the narrator's walk through dilapidated, hollowed-out towns and isolated countryside, but chains of association between Suffolk and other places and times, chains forged by those evident traces of violent events.

Relating to our methodological challenge, in *The Rings of Saturn* Sebald appears to recognise the potential for the lives of those caught up in destructive events to be effaced even as they are hinted at by these traces. At one point, the narrator describes the experience of encountering that debris as one that obscures rather than reveals past lives, resulting in knowledge akin to “a dark background with a grey smudge in it, a slate pencil drawing, some unclear letters and numbers in a gothic script, blurred and half wiped away with a damp rug” (ibid: 177-8). Significantly, the narrator does not propose that uncovering the subjectivities of past lives can act as a counterweight to this experience afforded by debris. Rather, the narrator obsessively details the various “elective affinities and correspondences” that he comes across on his journey (ibid: 182). Throughout this walking trip, as Sebald weaves together traces of violence based on coincidence and proximity, these juxtapositions invite readers to consider associations between events based on what they leave behind, and thus to consider those now absent, and their effacement from historical narratives, in a new light (Joldersma, 2014: 43-4).

In *Rings*, the narrative frequently branches off into multiple overlapping lines, with one narrative voice melting into another. Despite this seeming randomness and discontinuity, Sebald's narrative transitions between these different spaces and times imaginatively tie them together, with the narrative looping back and forth to explicitly or implicitly link different traces of violence through coincidence (Gray, 2009: 41-2, 47). The associations posited by this narration appear designed to prompt readers' consideration of the particular qualities of the memories and debris left behind by

violence, qualities of partiality, decay, and absence. As Richard Gray argues, the narrative coincidences of *Rings* keep the historical fragments encountered by Sebald's narrator in "a state of suspension" (Gray, 2010: 41). Through narrative association, "entropy itself is held in abeyance", as certain characteristics of these traces that might otherwise dissipate and escape attention instead form the basis for "relational affinities" that emerge from their narrative weaving. Like the rock fragments that now form the real rings of Saturn, these traces of violence are held in "suspended animation" by their proximity, "between de-composition and re-amalgamation" (ibid: 42). These traces' qualities neither pass by unnoticed, nor coalesce into a single coherent narrative of history, but keep one another in suspension. This in turn prompts readers to consider aspects of these historical fragments that otherwise go unnoticed, aspects that disrupt a singular narrative, as discussed in the Introduction.

For our purposes, this suspension of traces can highlight representational dynamics of absence: how absence is given meaning and shapes understandings of violence in ways that go unspoken. This can reveal to readers the ethical stakes of witnessing these absences, even to the point of implicitly critiquing attempts to 'recognise' suffering subjectivities in this residue.

An example from Sebald's work demonstrates the analytical purchase of this approach and its relevance to covert counter-terrorism. During one passage in *The Rings of Saturn* the wandering narrator reflects on the herring industry along the coast of Suffolk, describing a series of experiments once carried out on herring to determine the extent to which they could survive outside of water. "This process inspired by our thirst for knowledge", he says, "might be described as the most extreme of the sufferings undergone by a species always threatened with disaster". After describing these experiments, the narrator notes that despite the common assumption that herring do

not feel pain, “the truth is that we do not know what the herring feels”. This passage is accompanied by a photograph of seemingly-nonchalant fishermen knee-deep in the herring they have caught (Sebald, 2002: 57). The narrator then turns to the story of an eccentric recluse, George Wyndham Le Strange, who left his fortune to his housekeeper as recognition of her agreement never to speak to him for over thirty years. After off-handedly mentioning that Le Strange had served in the anti-tank regiment that had liberated the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in April 1945, Sebald prints a full-spread grainy photograph of what was presumably discovered upon that liberation: mounds of barely-visible corpses covered up by tents and shaded by trees (ibid: 59-61).

While this series of pages might seem at first to be positing an equivalence between two seemingly unrelated events, the fishing of herring and the Shoah, in fact the passage reflects on how the residue of past violence that one did not witness shapes understanding in the present. By noting Le Strange's role in World War Two, Sebald alludes that the man's hermetic silence is a result of his war experience. When presented alongside the weathered photograph, however, Le Strange's silence emphasises the reader's inability to comprehend his witnessing of that violence, with the residue of photography unable to transmit that experience. The reader nevertheless understands that this violence did occur and that the people whose bodies are barely discernible in the photograph did suffer egregiously, despite the fact that markers of this suffering are rendered obscure in this blurred image, leaving that suffering represented only indirectly through the silence that alludes to Le Strange's trauma. The juxtaposition of the story of herring, however, highlights the different emotional reactions to each event. While the experiments carried out on the herring is described in some detail, contrasting Le Strange's silence, the reader is likely to feel no more than “puzzled horror, perhaps even sorrow, but a muted sorrow... not a deep feeling of horror or

disgust as we might feel over a singularly repellent act of cruelty to, say, a large mammal” (Bernstein, 2009: 45).

While by itself this reaction might appear an inevitable reaction to such an event, since in the narrator's words we do not know what herring feel, the juxtaposition with Le Strange's story de-naturalises this reaction by provoking the thought that it is actually the way the herring have been represented over time that allows for this muted response. The two photographs share representational qualities: both show piles of undifferentiated, almost indistinguishable bodies whose contextualisation signifies the absence of clear markers of suffering, as well as the absence of victims' experience. These similarities, however, prompt an awareness that it is *despite* these absences that readers acknowledge the suffering of those who died during the Holocaust, whereas with the herring readers are *enabled* by this representation to dismiss the possibility of their suffering. The juxtaposition suggests that the “forms of knowledge through which we have placed the herring”, which the narrator describes while outlining their experimentation, marginalise interest in the experiences of those herring in the course of this experimentation. They do so by obscuring “the fact of [herring's] sentience, their being alive”, prompting witnesses to understand their own muted sorrow as an inevitable reaction to the nature of herring themselves; for when represented in “educational movies, natural histories [and] scientific experiments”, herring appear as if they do not feel pain (ibid: 50). This juxtaposition therefore reveals a shared representational dynamic across both images that marginalises absent experiences of suffering, and prompts readers to consider how this dynamic relies on forms of knowledge that are now largely rejected in the case of Bergen-Belsen, hence the different emotional reaction, but remain accepted and so naturalise that dynamic in the case of herring. That acceptance is revealed to produce a very different ethical

orientation towards absence.

Historical affiliation is therefore a way to study the ethics of witnessing state violence that goes beyond the question of whether suffering is 'recognisable' in each case. Such an analysis does not presume knowledge of those markers that accurately reflect suffering, as if to resolve the question of the herring's experience, but rather examines how representations circumscribe the relevance of living or dead beings to the meaning attached to events. That circumscription shapes the ethical consideration that witnesses are prompted to give to those beings – for instance, as inert matter or sentient creatures. In this analysis, ethics is not about whether witnesses can 'respond' to suffering – as if we can always know whether such suffering exists or not – but whether representations obscure or naturalise the process by which they delimit the meaning of beings. An affiliation between residue based on shared qualities of absence can therefore establish how that which is absent is treated within a representation in ways that go unarticulated. An historical affiliation involving covert counter-terrorism would need to account for what is particular about the absences in news coverage of these events, how those absences are ascribed characteristics and shape the meaning of events. Such an affiliation is not premised on similarities in the acts of violence themselves – indeed, it allows for non-causal, non-linear associations between vastly different events – but on similarities in the traces left in their aftermath.

The historical affiliation threaded throughout this thesis associates contemporary portrayals of covert counter-terrorism with national representations of lynching practice in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This affiliation is based on a representational similarity of absence: both practices are represented through public traces of violence that do *not* include documentation of its enactment or the violated bodies at its centre. As discussed in the

Introduction, recent scholarship has attended to the national representation of lynching outside their immediate localities, on terms not necessarily set by lynching perpetrators. The vast majority of lynchings in the U.S. were not represented nationally through documentation of the act itself, and in particular not through visual documentation of the violence as it unfolded. That documentation was secreted among local sympathetic communities in an attempt to control the meaning of the practice and the identities ascribed to those individuals and communities implicated in it (Wood, 2009: 12-14, 103-9). Thus “although some lynching images... circulated nationally, most did not, especially as the antilynching movement gathered steam in the early twentieth century” (ibid: 105). Journalists of national newspapers instead drew upon places and objects related to the lynching which were documented in its aftermath – courtrooms, streets, lynching trees and so on (ibid: 106). These traces were contextualised not by perpetrators' rationales but by various claims made about the practice, from eye-witness accounts and textual re-constructions to journalistic and editorial arguments as to the causes of the violence. While lynch victims were often described and represented, their lynched bodies became absent traces, absences signified through the traces that were drawn upon by newspapers.

The absence of violated bodies gained meaning within a particular narrative that portrayed lynching practice as unconnected to wider society. As with contemporary covert counter-terrorism, lynching was characterised as violence organised without national public knowledge until after it occurred, and as a practice that had not been countenanced by that public. With documentation of these events themselves seemingly secreted, censored or unavailable, those public traces that remained allowed lynching to be represented as cutting against the grain of societal developments which otherwise indicated a move away from a political culture that would condone such violence.

National commentators lamented lynching as an aberrant reversion to barbarism that risked spreading like a disease and stymieing progress towards a more civilised society. These claims were made despite the fact that the evidence of lynching which was cited – from mock re-enactments of the practice to lynchings' occurrence in well-connected urban centres – hinted at the practice's relation to social changes heralded by modernity (Goldsby, 2006: 18-25; Wood, 2009: 5-9). This representation of lynching as an atavistic reflection of regional cultures continued through the mid-twentieth century, when the increasingly private and secretive nature of lynching themselves was interpreted as a sign of a wider societal shift away from social relations that would inculcate the practice (Rushdy, 2012: 97-105). National coverage thus spatialised and temporalised the practice as a regional throwback, discursively positioning the violence as separate from U.S. society at large and obscuring its potential connections to or fit within wider societal developments (Goldsby, 2006: 56-7, 280-1).

This representation of lynching had a crucial consequence for the meaning attached to the absent bodies of lynch victims and the violence committed against them that remained outside the public sphere. Within this national news narrative of lynching as an aberrant regression from wider society, newsreaders were prompted to adopt the position of that society and to focus on the separation between it and this unseen violence. From this subject-position, the absences discussed above were meaningful only as reflecting this separation. This representational dynamic did not shape subject-positions of assent towards the practice: witnesses of its public traces were not prompted to adopt a discursive framework echoing perpetrators' rationale for the violence. But as subsequent chapters will elaborate, this subject-position delimited the ethical orientation of newsreaders towards the absent violence and victims of lynching. In different ways, the narrative of a disconnect from wider society curtailed

consideration of the violence as worthy of ethical scrutiny in its own right, by delimiting the relevance of the violence itself to the meaning and significance of these events. The unseen violence and lynched bodies became significant only as evidence of this narrative of aberration. An ethical understanding of what was perpetuating the violence and newsreaders' potential link to this process was also curtailed, since these representations obscured how lynching was enmeshed in broader societal developments.

Contemporary covert counter-terrorism and lynching practice a century earlier differ markedly in their dynamics of violence. But their shared representational quality of absence, the absence of documentation of the violent event and its casualties, allows for an historical affiliation in order to examine whether representational dynamics that are more easily identifiable in one case – due to the explicit articulation of lynching as a societal anomaly – are active but obscured in the other case. Covert counter-terrorism is not articulated as spatially and temporally removed from wider society in the same way as lynching: unlike the latter, these operations are not represented as some aberrant throwback. But the signified absence of the violence and its violated bodies does produce representations of these practices as distant from the U.S. and British public – not through explicit narration, but through intimation. While these intimations undermine any potential echoes of a state rationalisation, as the earlier example of the Shabwa drone strike demonstrated, they can also delimit the importance of absent casualties to these events while obscuring how this takes place. As subsequent chapters argue, this delimitation goes unsaid and thus risks being unacknowledged. An historical affiliation with lynching practice helps to highlight this dynamic and its obscuration.

Conclusion: responding to absence

This chapter has built on the argument of the previous one, that state secrecy need not rationalise the state's use of violence in public discourse but can instead implicitly undermine any rationalisation. That argument concluded that state secrecy which does not articulate the rationale for its use might provoke doubts and uncertainties about the public evidence of the corresponding covert action, defining that action as enigmatic. The present chapter has qualified this idea by investigating the other important part of covert action representations today: the absences materialised by rumours and debris left in the wake of operations. A suspicion of secrecy does not just frame those traces as significant, but gives particular meaning to the signified absence of certain people and objects from this public evidence: as reflecting lacunae, ambiguities and contradictions that leave aspects of 'what happened' unresolved, and might hint at things about the event which would otherwise remain secreted. Within that space of uncertainty, the public traces of covert counter-terrorism can allude to unverifiable possibilities about those absent things, transforming these traces from enigmatic to suggestive. The chapter conceptualised this process as resulting from the absences of residue, those things left in the wake of a covert operation which signify its having passed unseen. Residue of covert violence, the chapter argued, is able to produce intimations about that which remains outside the public sphere.

This chapter has aimed not just to outline this dynamic of intimation but to explore its significance for ethical witnessing in relation to covert counter-terrorism. Intimations from residue are not addresses made by a political actor to the public at large, and as such they reshape the idea of subject-formation as a matter merely of accepting or rejecting state narratives for its own actions. These intimations, moreover, suggest possibilities around covert events that implicitly undercut any such narrative. Subject-positions in this case are produced as a result of equivocal absences: those

absences do not 'address' witnesses but are framed by secrecy as suggestive. To talk of assenting to or dissenting from their suggestions mischaracterises this discursive dynamic: intimations from absence remain unverifiable, prompting witnesses only to consider their possibility, and to see absences as significant in that they do not allow for confirmation either way but equally cannot confirm explicit claims about the event. As a result, these intimations shape ethical orientations towards the state perpetrator and casualties of operations – not within terms set by a state rationale, but through the instability of public evidence. What would it mean, then, to respond ethically to these absences?

The chapter has proposed an historical affiliation as the beginning of an answer to this question. By associating covert counter-terrorism portrayals with those of lynching a century earlier, the aim is to 'suspend' the entropic and disintegrative qualities of these traces, in order to examine how absent people and objects are implicitly given meaning in ways that go unacknowledged in these representations. This affiliation is based on shared absences, the absence of violence and of violated bodies in these portrayals, with lynching representations giving these absences meaning in ways that marginalise interest in the violence inflicted upon victims. Juxtaposing these representations with those of covert counter-terrorism can highlight any similar dynamics in the latter case that are otherwise obscured.

This analysis suggests that the question of an ethical witnessing of residue goes beyond recognising suffering. What shapes the ethical orientation of witnesses towards absent violence and bodies in this case is whether and how those absences become part of the significance attached to covert events: by what criteria are witnesses prompted to evaluate these unseen operations, and how does this affect their consideration of the violence at the absent centre of these operations?

The following chapters identify intimations from residue, and associate them with representations of lynching, in order to answer these questions. In so doing, they analyse the subject-positions shaped by this residue, not by presuming a response to the state of assent or dissent, but by conceptualising a response to absence that can marginalise the violence inflicted upon casualties even while perceiving these operations as questionable and discomforting. This kind of interpellation repositions ethics as a matter not of avoiding complicity, but of questioning the idea that witnesses are distanced and therefore unconnected to these unseen events.

Chapter 3

Absent traces and the ephemerality of drone strikes

If there is one image whose ubiquity across popular media has made it an exemplar of the supposed 'Obama era' of counter-terrorism, it is that of the anonymous and indistinctive Unmanned Aerial Vehicle flying through the sky, presumed to be on a mission to take out terrorist suspects through missile strikes. Media and scholarly references to the 'drone age' (Calhoun, 2015), the 'age of drone warfare' (L. Gardner, 2013), the 'drone era' (Bass, 2014) and 'remote control warfare' (Gusterson, 2016) attest to the perceived centrality of this technology in contemporary counter-terrorism. Indeed, the use of armed UAVs has increased exponentially under President Obama, with at least eight times as many strikes having been launched by 2014 in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia since Obama's first inauguration compared to the whole of President Bush's terms in office (Serle, 2014a). This ubiquity in the public sphere is matched by portrayed omniscience on the part of the drone itself. The use of stock photographs of a drone in flight in news discussion of the technology frequently fails to mark out or qualify the pictured drone as having any distinguishing features, as being a single unique instance of a UAV on a particular mission. Because of this lack of spatial and temporal delineation, drones are implicitly portrayed as having the ability to fly over and scrutinise any part of the Earth, as being able to be anywhere at any time (Riopelle and Muniandy, 2013: 158). The monotony of these unremarkable, indistinct and undynamic photographs is also likely, as Ohl (2015) argues, to dull witnesses' senses towards the violence of drone warfare, by prompting disengagement from its representation.

This monotonous ubiquity and omniscience, however, has representational consequences which have not yet been acknowledged in scholarship. One of the most ubiquitous images related to the drone programmes, a stock photograph of an armed drone in flight which exemplifies the qualities noted above, is in fact a fake (Figure 4). As James Bridle notes, “the “canonical” image of a drone”, which by 2013 was “the first Google image result for “drone” and as such is reproduced endlessly elsewhere”, displays many physical inaccuracies on close inspection: “missing hatches on the cockpit and tail, the shape of the air intake, the greebling on the fins and body. That ‘NY’ on the tail: it’s not aligned properly, it’s a photoshop” (Bridle, 2013). The image is in fact a rendering from a 3D computer-generated model, whose creator Michael Hahn “pieced together the planes insignia for [sic] references images found on wikipedia and google searches”, while “[t]he background came from a now-difficult-to-find Flickr image of the Afghani landscape” (quoted in Madrigal, 2013). This compositing using different online sources represents an effort to visualise unseen events using their few traces in the public sphere: knowledge of the shape and capabilities of a Reaper drone and the places where they are being deployed. An unseen event is thus made visible in unreal form, represented through a drone whose serial number '85-566' is fantastical, since the first two digits are supposed to indicate the year the aircraft entered service (Bridle, 2013).



Figure 4: Michael Hahn's composite 3D modelling of a Reaper drone (Madrigal, 2013).

This composite image used to represent a largely-unseen state policy demonstrates how secrecy has shaped portrayals of counter-terrorism in the public sphere. Drone strikes are at present conducted by three different U.S. entities, with the U.S. Air Force conducting overt military strikes in official war theatres, while strikes outside those areas are carried out by both the Central Intelligence Agency and the SOCOM subdivision Joint Special Operations Command (*Oxford Analytica*, 2013; Zenko, 2013). This latter use of armed drones to target suspected terrorists worldwide were initially authorised as part of the 17 September 2001 Presidential Directive discussed in the Introduction (Fuller, 2015: 786-7). The CIA is instructed to conduct strikes under Title 50 of the U.S. Code, that is, so that U.S. Government sponsorship is neither apparent nor acknowledged publicly. JSOC has at times also been instructed to operate under Title 50, alongside the CIA; at other times, it has conducted strikes covertly while avoiding both Title 50 stipulations and the oversight normally applied to 'armed forces' operations, using the authority granted SOCOM by successive 'execute

orders' and Presidential Directives (Kibbe, 2011: 379-82; Scahill, 2013: 169-71; Turza, 2013; see Introduction). Regardless of statutory authority, all these strikes are covert. The two agencies have operated parallel and joint kill/capture programmes in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia. While U.S. state officials assert that the U.S. can conduct counter-terrorism outside official battlefields, and have in this context referenced "targeted action... with remotely piloted aircraft" (Obama, quoted in *The White House*, 2013; see also Koh, 2010; *The White House*, 2011), these programmes' operations appear designed so that U.S. sponsorship is neither apparent nor officially acknowledged (Lederman, 2014; N. Shah, 2014: 163-7; Chaynes, 2015: 86).

State secrecy has consequently shaped snippets of public information on strikes, which are assembled into visual representations claiming to make these programmes visible. Indeed, as of May 2016, four of the first five Google Images search results for 'drone attack' appear to be computer renderings (google.co.uk, 27 May 2016; see eg. Bridle, 2015). As such, these images flex the lines of visibility and invisibility around strikes (Campbell, 2007: 358). But secrecy also contributes to the meaning signified by such images. Even minor inaccuracies aside, that images such as the above should have become ubiquitous is striking considering that "on even a little closer inspection [it] is clearly a rendering". As Alexis Madrigal argues, however, drones in photographs known to be real equally "seem more rendering than material object" (Madrigal, 2013; see eg. Figure 5). The uncanniness of these images is given particular meaning through accompanying news framings which qualify them as glimpses of an ongoing strike programme. Positioned as reflecting a state foreign policy, the sparse and unspecific quality of these scenes hints at the idea that not everything about these ongoing events is in the public sphere – when used generically in news stories, the images allude to their own partiality through the absence of contextualising information within and around

them. This allusion produces state secrecy as a suspicion related to ongoing state actions. Both real and fake images thus signify ambiguity: they are framed as representing ongoing state activities, yet it remains unclear what exactly they show or reveal about those operations.



Figure 5: "An MQ-9 Reaper, armed with GBU-12 Paveway II laser guided munitions and AGM-114 Hellfire missiles, piloted by Col. Lex Turner flies a combat mission over southern Afghanistan" (*U.S. Air Force*, 2015).

What the Photoshopped image of the Reaper drone demonstrates is how the public representation of drone strikes has been shaped by two factors: the public existence of these operations only in residue, and a suspicion of secrecy that surrounds them. Hahn's image was created as a reaction to the lack of documentation of drone strike events: "We see the aftermath of explosions, sometimes, but almost never the actual movements of unmanned aerial vehicles as they strike in Somalia or Afghanistan"

(Madrigal, 2013). At the same time, the image looks the way it does because of those public traces of drone strikes that do exist: details of where they take place, what drones look like and how strikes are undertaken. A suspicion of secrecy that surrounds individual strikes then colours the implicit meaning and significance of an image such as this: it emerges as a (faked) trace of events that otherwise remain unseen and are suspected of being a secret kept by the state from the public. These traces gain significance in relation to secrecy – likely the reason why this photograph has achieved its level of exposure.

It is this interplay of public traces and a suspicion of secrecy that structures the analysis of the present chapter. Covert drone strikes are publicly represented through their residue, from details of the general operating procedures used to enact them to the material and less-than-material remainders that litter the site of individual strikes. Crucially, there are rarely any markers of the bodies of casualties in these representations. The fact or possibility of deaths and injuries are certainly discussed, as are rumours and speculative details of the identities of those targeted or struck. But the representational markers used to portray strikes in their aftermath are decidedly non-bodily; textual descriptions or visualisations of bodies are rarely among them. The absence of these bodies and other traces of drone strikes, however, is first highlighted by claims of events that would involve such bodies and then made suggestive by the suspicion of secrecy that surrounds these events. As the chapter will demonstrate, the public residue drawn on by journalists in accounts of these programmes intimate absent traces of drone strikes and their possible characteristics.

The ability of drone strike representations to produce intimations of absent bodies and objects is an important addition to scholarly work on drone strikes and their political dynamics. Before analysing these intimations, therefore, the chapter first

provides an overview of previous scholarship and demonstrates how this work has located the ontology of drone warfare in the materials, discourses and networks that propagate it. As a result, past scholarship has argued that strikes materialise spaces and identities that cohere with the internal rationalisation of this violence, as reflected in the materials and practices that operate drones. The representational power of strikes, the meanings they produce in the world, is reduced to their operationalisation. But intimations from news coverage demonstrate how strikes exist *beyond* the networks and materiality of targeting procedures, and how their representational dynamics can shape social reality *in excess* of their internal rationalisation.

Having assessed past research, the chapter proceeds to analyse newspaper and social media coverage of covert strikes from 2011 to 2015, pivoting on three periods when U.S. and British critical interest in drone warfare increased: the period January-April 2011, during which there was increasing talk of a rift in U.S.-Pakistan relations as a result of strikes in the latter state; the period May-June 2012, when it was revealed that President Obama had been regularly overseeing a 'kill list' of potential targets for strikes; and the period February-March 2013, covering the lead up to and aftermath of John Brennan's confirmation hearing as the new director of the CIA. This selection method is supported by previous research, which has established that representational practices around foreign policy are often intensified and more richly developed at such moments of contestation around a political issue, providing a relevant source of data that likely influences subsequent representations (Doty, 1996: 12-13). This focus also allows us to test the idea that intimations from residue could reconfigure state rationalisations, which similarly intensify at such times. Within these three periods, across the eighteen British and three U.S. newspapers identified in the Introduction, all articles which discussed the covert drone programmes or covert strikes were analysed.

A representative sample of articles on individual strikes outside these periods from 2013 to 2015 have also been included in order to assess representations of strikes when they actually occur.

In examining this coverage, the chapter argues that the residue used to report on the covert strike programmes – the smoke, rubble and scant operational details left in their wake – produces a suspicion of secrecy around these programmes and their individual strikes. With residue framed as significant on these grounds, it is then able to intimate ideas about that which residue leaves unknown or ambiguous, namely details of the casualties and operating networks that are absent from these public traces. These intimations suggest that casualties may not have been the claimed or intended targets, and that targeting mechanisms may not be as accurate as suggested in official and unofficial state assurances. These unverifiable possibilities undermine the explicit claims made in these representations about the precision targeting quality of strikes, the proffered source of their efficacy and legitimacy. By shaping subject-positions focused on these possibilities, these representations curtail any rationalisation of covert drone warfare in line with the representations and practices that enact them, including public rationalisations offered in the abstract by the Obama administration.

In circumventing a state rationalisation of these strikes, however, these intimations of absent casualties and targeting networks reframe these unseen events. While a suspicion of secrecy signifies that these programmes continue outside the public sphere, the equivocal absences within strike residue produce the idea that strikes are too fleeting, too spatially and temporally indistinct, and too insubstantial in their public mark for public witnesses of its traces to comprehend its dynamics, to understand 'what happened'. Strikes are implicitly represented as too ephemeral and evanescent for details of their absent casualties and targeting procedures to be established. The subject-

position produced as a result is examined in this chapter through the historical affiliation with national U.S. coverage of lynching in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As is explained, this coverage, which similarly drew on non-bodily traces in the wake of the violence, gave meaning to the practice as something confronting society in its aberrance, as significant in challenging society to comprehend its causes and implications. Newsreaders were prompted to focus on that struggle to comprehend, marginalising the violence inflicted upon lynch victims from the significance ascribed to the practice; lynch victims became relevant only in indicating the practice's unspeakable, confounding and incomprehensible quality.

The chapter demonstrates that drone strike representations enact a similar dynamic but implicitly, through unspoken hints and allusions rather than explicit narration. As intimations of casualties represent strikes as ongoing but too ephemeral to scrutinise, witnesses are prompted to focus on the consequent struggle to comprehend this practice's intangible dynamics, including the public's relation to this seemingly new form of state warfare. While intimations prompt witnesses of residue to consider what these absences in residue might indicate about counter-terrorist states' pretensions to due diligence and justice, that same subject-position is positioned as part of a wider society that is spatially distanced and morally disconnected from strikes. The ethical orientation towards strike violence is reduced as a result, with absent casualties intimated as significant only as part of strikes' intangibility, as indicating the public difficulty in pinning down these fleeting events. As a consequence, the relationship that *does* exist between strikes and witnesses, whereby the latter are prompted to adopt a subject-position that marginalises the violence inflicted upon casualties, itself escapes scrutiny and continues unnoticed.

Theorising 'targeted killing' beyond its operationalisation

As the computer-rendered composite image demonstrates, the public imaginary surrounding drone strikes has been influenced by the scattered information about this practice that circulates in the public sphere. Critical scholars and journalists have drawn on snippets of information, rumour and debris to assemble particular understandings of drone warfare. These understandings have delimited the ontology of drone warfare, of what constitutes this warfare, and the kind of issues and discussion considered relevant to understanding that warfare. Speculative or rumour-based details have consequently been presented as emblematic of the practice in popular and scholarly discourse, even as the piecemeal nature of those details has been acknowledged. The idea that these snippets have become emblematic echoes Bhattacharyya's conception of "iconic glimpses" of violent 'War on Terror' practices, whereby one "moment" or fragment of a practice "stand[s] in for the whole". That fragment is framed as reflecting the essential dynamics of that practice, such that "what is represented purports to be the instance that holds the meaning of the process" (Bhattacharyya, 2008: 58, 124). Sparse snapshots of the covert drone programmes have been framed as nonetheless condensing the 'meaning' of the practice for those who do not have access to the larger secret process that constitutes it (ibid: 130). The difference with drone strikes as opposed to previous War on Terror practices, however, is that these snippets do not show the enactment of this practice but represent its public traces.

Critical scholarship has created iconic glimpses of drone warfare by drawing on traces of the *operationalisation* of drone strikes policy, covering the visualisation methods of drone surveillance, the operating procedures of target-construction, and the materiality and embodiment involved in drone strike networks. By formulating these traces as glimpses that can 'stand in' for drone warfare as a whole, critical literature in

International Relations, political geography and security studies has traced the existence and political dynamics of strikes, the meanings that strikes produce in the world, to the materials, discourses and networks that operate these programmes. In so doing, this literature has reduced the ontology of drone warfare, that which constitutes strikes in the world, to the prosecution of strikes within these state procedures and networks, and delimited strikes' political dynamics to those that correlate to their internal representation and prosecution. As such, the spaces and identities that are produced by drone strikes – that is, the way that social reality is made intelligible, giving spaces and identities materiality, through the social practices that constitute strikes (Dunn, 2009: 426, 431) – have been conceptualised as cohering with the internal rationalisation of this violence, with the way this violence is made meaningful by these materials and operating procedures. Secrecy is implicitly relevant only insofar as it hampers analysis by restricting access to the event of a strike, which exists outside the public sphere. What happens once strikes leave the state apparatuses that enact them and become *public events* through the narration of their public traces is left unaddressed (although for a recent rare exception analysing overt Israeli strikes, see Walters, 2014).

The theorisation of covert strikes through their operationalisation reflects the broader public framing of the policy as one of 'targeted killing'. From early in Obama's presidency, off-the-record explanations of drone policy, the confirmation of strikes against 'high-ranking' terrorists (eg. Hussain, 2009; Spiegel and Solomon, 2009; P. Shah, 2009), and military comparisons with Israel's assassination policy against Palestinian opponents (Mazetti, 2009; Shane, 2009; see Kendall 2001; Ben-Naftali and Michaeli 2003), have led to drone warfare being contextualised as a state strategy of locating and eliminating particular individuals (Mayer, 2009). Indeed, generalised state acknowledgements of strike programmes outside official battlefields have centred

practices of target identification (Koh, 2010; *The Daily Telegraph*, 2012; *The White House*, 2013).

Notwithstanding that the majority of strikes are 'signature strikes' (see Introduction), targeting not identified individuals but detected patterns and irregularities in unknown bodies' behaviours (Crampton et al, 2014: 207-9), the targeted killing framing remains the dominant lens through which drone violence is debated in public discourse (eg. Alston, 2010; *Human Rights Watch*, 2014) and security studies scholarship (eg. Boyle, 2013; McCrisken, 2013), having become the "term du jour" by which proponents themselves have "rebranded" state violence (Scahill, 2015b). While critical scholarship on drone warfare has extensively critiqued the claims of state officials regarding the targeting precision of strikes, and has analysed both personality and signature strikes, from early on it has conceptualised drone warfare through the networks, procedures and materials that enact it (eg. Downes, 2004; Ulrich, 2004). Scholarship has located the representational practices that produce drone strikes in the world, the "discourses [that] constitute the objects of which they speak" (Bialasiewicz et al, 2007: 406), *within* these practices and materials, theorising that strikes materialise spaces and identities consistent with drone warfare's internal rationalisation.

For Grégoire Chamayou, this conceptual and analysis focus is a matter of "taking apart the mechanism of violence" in order to "discover the implications of how it works for the action that it implements". Chamayou thus extrapolates the discursive dynamics of strikes from those mechanisms, since the means of violence "not only make it possible to take action but also *determine the form of that action*" (Chamayou, 2015: 17, emphasis added). Drawing on snippets of targeting procedures, Chamayou theorises the covert drone programme as a form of militarised manhunting, whose apparatuses of visualisation and surveillance of territory and bodies shift the dynamics of warfare (ibid:

37-45). For theorists, the target-construction and identification involved in drone operations means that drones “fulfil the hunter-killer role conveyed by their hideous names” (D. Gregory, 2012: 169), this being a reference to the well-known Predator model of UAV. According to Chamayou, this shift in the dynamics of warfare produces subject-positions of the drone-as-hunter and its evasive prey, representing strikes through these identities, while re-constructing the space of 'armed conflict' where lethal means may be legitimately used – from a fixed battlefield located around those engaged in combat, to an indeterminate space that ceaselessly re-forms wherever the target is located (Chamayou, 2015: 30-5, 52-9).

Chamayou's analysis demonstrates what is at stake in locating the ontology of drone warfare in its materials and practices of prosecution. From this perspective, drone warfare shapes spaces and identities that rationalise drone violence: individuals are produced as threats and thus legitimate targets, while spaces are rendered as both unruly, therefore threatening, and endlessly mutable in scale and position for the purposes of mobile networks of violence. Critical scholarship that begins with the operationalisation of strikes frames the challenge of drone warfare as one of revealing how this production of space and identity occurs. The analytic that is constructed to do so has two consequences: it delimits drone strikes to the materials and practices that enact them *outside the public sphere*; and it relegates secrecy and absences to epistemological barriers to research.

Scholarship examining the visual technologies of drone surveillance and targeting echoes this analytic. Examining the 'kill chain' of “actors, objects, practices, discourses and affects” which enact both overt and covert drone strikes, Gregory details the 'scopic regime' that is reiterated within this chain, culturally-mediated frames of vision that helps drone pilots and analysts make sense of the wealth of visual data that

drones accumulate (D. Gregory, 2011: 196, 190). Produced through the combination of surveillance imagery and real-time connectivity between actors at different points of targeting networks, this regime shapes pilot subject-positions that are immersed in ambiguous visualisations of the terrain 'down below' but that are also intimately connected to fellow soldiers within these networks and visualised on that terrain. Military personnel below are brought 'closer' to pilots, "render[ing] 'Our' space familiar even in 'their' space – which remains obdurately Other", filled with potential but opaque threats (ibid: 201). Wall and Monahan elaborate the role of visibility, conceptualising drone networks as practising an "exclusionary politics of omniscient vision", where ambiguous visual information is placed within "functional categories" that "correspond to the needs and biases of the operators, not the targets, of surveillance" (T. Wall and Monahan, 2011: 243, 240). This scopic regime "radically homogeniz[e] local difference, lumping together innocent civilians with enemy combatants" (ibid: 240). The event of the strike is theorised as producing homogeneously dangerous spaces and peoples.

Other analyses focus on how the operating procedures of covert 'signature strikes' produce people and terrain in biopolitical terms, with observed behaviours, rather than known identities, coded and categorised based on a notion of the potential for future threat. Locating the political dynamics of strikes in the "governmental technologies" and "political rationalities" of target-construction, Shaw theorises that the coding of information on potential targets' behaviours into analysable patterns produces targets as "virtualised forms of emergence that may become threats in the future", based on a "process-based, even epidemiological understanding of danger" (Shaw, 2013: 540, 549, 548). Allinson modifies this biopolitical theorisation by conceptualising target-construction as a "racial algorithm of distinction", whereby surveillance and auditing produce distinctions between populations worthy of life and populations whose lives

threaten the health of the former (Allinson, 2015: 117, 118-20). This conceptualises drone strikes from the perspective of “[t]he drone’s eye view”, with the “visible techniques of distinction and allocation... used by the drone pilots” producing social reality by “delineating those areas and populations” where death is acceptable (ibid: 120). Vasko goes one further, analysing how “reconnaissance-strike complexes” rely on anthropological knowledge, coding and mapping patterns of behaviour through concepts of culture (Vasko, 2013: 85, 95-7). By coding behaviour as evidence of culture, strike events produce spaces in terms of “hierarchical relations”, with spaces containing potentially-threatening cultural behaviours constituted as “spaces of threat [that] are always threatening the Homeland, and thus need to be intervened upon” (ibid: 91, 92). This in turn “fully realise[s]” the subject-position of “a secured, singular, and universal power like the United States” (ibid: 90). In the biopolitical reading of operating procedures, strikes produce threatening spaces and bodies and collective identities that need securing against infiltration by the former.

Finally, critical scholarship focusing on the materiality and physical embodiment of drone warfare locates the political dynamics of strikes in the materials and flesh that enact this violence. Wilcox focuses on how visualisation and target-construction shape drone pilots’ bodily experience of feeling ‘at home’, of being within familiar spaces and social relations, by producing targets who are intimately experienced through visualisation as “embodying... formless, malevolent forces” and as therefore being ‘out of place’ (Wilcox, 2015: 128, original emphasis). Those targeted “are materialised” as close-but-distant “contaminating terrorist bodies” that are unassimilable and must be protected against (ibid: 130, 129). Holmqvist conceptualises a human-material assemblage of ‘fleshy’ and ‘steely’ bodies as constituting drone warfare, and points to the agency of materials within this assemblage, with the drone camera

screen recoding people and objects down below and fostering pilots' embodied experience of omnipresence (Holmqvist, 2013: 538-9, 543-5). These “material [powers]” and resultant experiences reshape the ontology or “norm of the human” in war, “producing populations” as “the grey mass of non-existence or possibly 'collateral damage'” (ibid: 550, 547). Material 'agents' therefore shape pilots' experience of spaces of violence. Finally, Shaw and Akhter posit a “more-than-human explanation” for “the transformation of war” through drone strikes (Shaw and Akhter, 2014: 215).

Cumulative Presidential Directives under which covert strikes are conducted decentralise responsibility, by legitimising anonymous bureaucratic actions and pre-empting sovereign decision-making. Meanwhile, the 'kill lists' of potential targets diffuse responsibility by subordinating individual pilots' judgement to targeting data and imagery that has already been shaped and coded within the targeting network (ibid: 221-2, 228-9). This analysis locates the political dynamics of drone violence in the spaces within which these objects circulate, “connecting battlefield with boardroom”. Secrecy is relevant insofar as it is a product of “bureaucratic power” that attempts to “deflect public criticism”, conceptually relegating it to these bureaucratic spaces (ibid: 221, 226).

Even scholarship which critiques the narrow foci of drone strike literature theorises the production of space through the state's operationalisation of this violence. While Grayson rightly notes scholarship's tendency to ignore how drones' “technical rationalities” are “culturally produced and circulated” through public narration, that “political culture” is conceptualised through “its deployment of violence” and “its own self-understanding” in the process (Grayson, 2012: 30). As such, cultural production is interpreted as a question of “how a liberal regime – as a potential assassin – understands itself as a moral actor and biopolitical entity” (ibid: 36, emphasis added). This

conceptualisation does not pinpoint the perceptual boundaries of that liberal regime – that is, who counts as producing these representations of targeted killing and self-understandings. While Grayson argues that the “policy resiliency” of strikes is partly dependent upon “forms of rationalisation” that make up its cultural narration, he also speaks of “audiences” who must recognise these rationalisations and accept their narration of events (ibid: 30, 36). This hints at the potential for representations encountered by a public 'audience' that exceed liberal states' rationalisation of their own violence.

By focusing on the operationalisation of covert strikes, be it the visual regimes, procedures of target-construction, or the materials and embodiments within drone networks, the above critical literature reduces the event of the strike to the materials and social practices that enact it, separating drone warfare from the public sphere. When these practices do cross over into the public sphere, they are theorised as materialising spaces and identities conducive to the internal rationalisation of this violence, of permanent potential threat. Secrecy, explicitly or implicitly, assists in this production of space by preventing access to the ontology of drone warfare, hiding the political dynamics of strikes that rationalise these programmes. This analytic echoes the phenomenon described by Roger Stahl as drone vision, where the view provided by a drone's 'gun camera' is interpreted as a glimpse of a wider hidden apparatus of power. This interpretation accepts the representation of subject and object implied by this militarised vision while imbuing the drone with an opaque power, as the object that sees all while remaining aloof (Stahl, 2013: 663-4). This perpetuates “the fantasy of gaining access to telepresent military power” through this glimpse (ibid: 667). This above theorisations similarly offer a fantasy of access to drone warfare, promising to reveal the 'meaning' of a state practice that remains largely hidden. Echoing the historical trend in

covert action research, these theorises implicitly conceptualise “a 'hidden truth'” (Mistry, 2011: 267) within the documentary archives and networked apparatuses of the state.

The problem with this promise is that the materialisation of drone strikes includes their existence as narrated events in public discourse. That existence is on the basis of the public traces of strikes which are left in their wake, since the unfolding of these events is rarely documented 'in the moment'. The existing critical scholarship on drones focuses on how the sensory phenomena which are surveyed and targeted by drones and drone pilots, the people and terrain down below, are 'recoded' through the materials, social practices and embodied experience involved in the operationalisation of drones, making those bodies and spaces intelligible in ways that match the internal rationalisation of this practice. By focusing on this internal dynamic, this scholarship's analytic makes the theoretical presumption identified by Rey Chow, that any encounter with new sensory phenomena is inevitably made intelligible within articulated schema of identity and alterity, such as those articulated by and which rationalise the operationalisation of drones (Chow, 2006: 62-3, 67). This theorisation presumes that such an encounter leads to the successful materialisation of space and identity conducive to those schema – indeed, this analytic builds that success *into its theory* and thus “essentiali[s] such alterity (or its process of reinscription)” (ibid: 63).

The analysis in this chapter avoids this theoretical presumption by examining representational practices that produce strikes *outside* of their operationalisation, and the subject-positions produced towards strikes as they exist in the public sphere. Within these public representations, the snippets of information referenced by the analyses discussed above may be modulated by other signifiers of drone warfare, namely the public traces, apparent secrecy and equivocal absences of strikes, all of which exist independent of state articulations. Such modulation can produce meanings *in excess* of

those suggested by any one signifier, including those of operating practices, and can thereby curtail a shaping of terrain and identity in line with the internal rationalisation of drone violence.

Lynching, drones, and the marginalisation of casualties

Just as the existence of covert drone strikes goes beyond their operationalisation to public traces, so too does the existence of absences related to these strikes. Regardless of how military-intelligence-policy practices might represent the actors and technologies involved in these operations, the residue that constitutes the public existence of these unseen events may materialise them differently *even as* those people and objects remain absent from the public sphere. The rendered image of a Reaper drone discussed earlier suggests that absence plays an important role in the discursive production of strikes: residue such as this image becomes significant in appearing to relate to unseen covert activities, but so too does the paucity and partiality of such residue, with the rendering's opaque surface hinting at what remains unconfirmed. How witnesses of residue are positioned towards the absences suggested by such paucity is a matter not of the state's targeting networks, but of how the remainders of those networks intimate various possibilities.

In order to examine the dynamic between secrecy and absence that positions newsreaders towards absent casualties and targeting networks, the chapter develops the historical affiliation introduced in the previous chapter between contemporary covert counter-terrorism and lynching in the United States. As noted, lynching practice was rarely portrayed in national news coverage through documentation of the event itself and the violated body at its centre. Drawing on eye-witness accounts, material debris,

speculation and rumour, coverage represented lynching in the absence of such documentation as an unspeakable and incomprehensible practice compared to 'modern society'. National discussion revolved around how to understand lynching in relation to wider societal developments that were otherwise seen to indicate a civilising of U.S. society (Goldsby, 2006: 18-25). By representing lynching within a narrative of societal progress, national coverage prompted newsreaders to disavow lynching violence as unconnected to wider society.

The notion that this violence was difficult to comprehend in relation to societal developments obscured how those developments, from changing citizenship laws to the growth of corporate capitalist social relations, had helped constitute this practice. Jacqueline Goldsby points by way of example to lynchings in response to suspected crimes of conspiring white and black men, crimes which signalled that new relations fostered by impersonal corporate contracts would override entrenched racial divisions. That those who then lynched the accused could use the anonymising processes of new judicial bureaucracy to avoid identifying one another demonstrates that lynchings were both shaped by and able to continue because of the increasingly depersonalised legal procedures of justice (ibid: 121-4). The extent to which modern societal developments were implicated in lynching, however, was masked by the national representation of the practice as an atavistic and barbaric throwback to past rituals of violence that was difficult to fathom given modern societal conditions (ibid: 56-7, 280-1). Lynching became something 'confronting' modern society rather than implicating it in any way.

The spatialising and temporalising of lynching practice discursively constructed and separated a national society from this violence and prompted newsreaders to consider themselves part of that society. From this subject-position, lynching was intelligible and significant in its confounding aberrance. With the struggle to

understand the practice becoming one of the pivots of national news accounts, these representations therefore prompted a focus back on those 'confronted' with this violence (Lutes, 2007: 471-2). Within this discourse, the body of the lynch victim, which is largely not co-present in these accounts, is signified in its absence only as part of what is unspeakable, incongruent and thus confounding about the practice. As such, the violated person at the centre of any lynching is figured as meaningful primarily as an emblem of this struggle to comprehend, and is made significant only on these terms. As Goldsby argues from contemporaneous literary accounts of lynching and related violence, the victim "becomes marginal to – precisely because he is a spectacle of – the story of his own... death", while "a spectacle of worried impotence... becomes the most important focal point in the story's telling", that is, in narratives of the practice (Goldsby, 2006: 147, 148). This signification of a worried impotence obscures how lynch victims are marginalised in the process, since it defines lynching as separate from and confounding to a public that *really is trying* to scrutinise this discomfiting violence.

This chapter uses an historical affiliation between lynching and contemporary covert counter-terrorism to examine whether news coverage of covert drone strikes enacts a similar dynamic that marginalises the violence inflicted on bodies by focusing on a struggle to comprehend. As the following analysis demonstrates, while the two sets of representations share an absence of documented violence and violated bodies, and both practices are represented as separate from wider society, the dynamic of disavowal and marginalisation takes place differently in the contemporary case. Rather than result from an explicit narrative of incongruity, this dynamic derives from the combination of secrecy and absence which makes the latter suggestive. Hints and allusions which result from this suggestiveness implicitly frame the covert drone programmes as spatially diffuse and temporally slight, and thus difficult to understand and judge based on their

public traces. This framing shapes a subject-position focused on the fleeting and ungraspable quality of this practice, and on trying to understand how it affects the public's relation to warfare. This focus marginalises the unseen violence and casualties of these operations in a way that does not draw attention to itself, since this marginalisation is not explicitly articulated through a narrative of regional aberrance but is a result of things left unspoken that emerge as suggestive possibilities. This historical affiliation pivots analysis towards problematising what might otherwise appear natural or incontestable – in this case, the image of strikes as intangible that allows for this marginalisation.

Actual criteria, potential targets

Most news coverage of the covert drone programmes is not coverage of individual strikes, which are rarely officially acknowledged and only intermittently covered in British and U.S. national presses (see eg. *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, 2012, 2014, 2015). Drone strikes are instead largely intimated, alluded to, through discussion of the U.S. administration's decision-making procedures for these programmes, in particular discussion of the criteria used to decide upon 'targets' for future 'personality strikes'. The various suspicions and suggestive snippets of information which circulate about these criteria constitute residue of actual strikes, being some of the more extensive traces of drone strikes' ongoing enactment without being markers of these events themselves. Reports of leaks or of attempts to force the U.S. government to release details of these criteria have not just emphasised that the latter are being withheld, but have carried various lacunae and uncertainties that signify the public absence of actual strikes conducted using these criteria. As reports on a state policy, they have also produced a suspicion of ongoing secrecy around those strikes and their

operating networks. Framed by this suspected secrecy, the partiality of coverage becomes suggestive public evidence of covert action, allowing those ambiguities to intimate the possibility that the real identities of those targeted remain unknown, unconfirmed or even secreted. This implicitly undermines explicit claims of strikes' accuracy and effectiveness, and of targets' dangerous terroristic nature. Yet those targeted are simultaneously marginalised from the significance of strikes, which pivots instead on the potential target as alluded to by absence, rather than violence inflicted on actual casualties.

Articles premised on discussion of drone strike policy have frequently framed 'the drones issue' as one revolving around "growing unease... that there are no publicly understood rules for picking targets" (*The New York Times*, 2013a). Thus in the run up to John Brennan's confirmation hearing, press coverage focused on U.S. lawmakers' repeated requests for the release of a "long-sought, classified Justice Department opinion" giving the Obama administration's legal justification for drone strikes against U.S. citizens abroad. Such coverage signifies that strikes are continuing on the basis of unclear targeting criteria, framing snippets of the latter as public traces of actual strikes. In this context, coverage presented the image of members of the House and Senate Intelligence Committees "go[ing] to an office... at the Justice Department, where they can sit and view the legal opinion" which "isn't being made public" (Gorman and Perez, 2013). The juxtaposition of the idea that strikes are ongoing and this image of Congressmen holed up in an office viewing classified targeting rules materialises absence: it signifies the lack of any other markers of actual strikes, including targets. This juxtaposition also produces a suspicion of secrecy in the public sphere, by signifying the possibility that those unseen strikes remain unacknowledged by Obama administration officials and are thereby being hidden along with the rules that govern

them.

This suspected secrecy makes the absence of markers of casualties suggestive, in that it indicates that their identities remain unconfirmed in the public sphere. Given the image of lawmakers viewing a classified memo on how those bodies were targeted, this equivocal absence alludes to the unverifiable possibility that those identities have also been secreted, or in fact cannot be proven by the Obama administration. Without a rationalisation of covertness by the U.S. state, absences produced by this representation intimate the ambiguous extent and purpose of state secrecy, alluding to the possible meaning of those absences and shaping a subject-position of doubt towards claims that, in Brennan's words, "[w]e... use these technologies carefully and responsibly" (ibid).

Yet while these intimations undermine explicit articulations of drone policy, curtailing an interpellation of assent, the subject-position produced does not constitute dissent from the state's use of violence. The unknown casualties of actual strikes are alluded to only through the figure of the ambiguous potential target. Brennan himself articulates this figure when justifying strikes: "Determinations about whether an individual fits the criteria for targeted killings are made on a case-by-case basis and a determination of how "imminent" a threat they pose, he wrote" (ibid). The sparseness of detail as to what 'imminent' means and the conspicuous lack of 'cases' again signifies the absence of casualties from the public sphere. In the context of suspected covertness around ongoing strikes, this absence intimates the possibility that claims of precision may remain unsupported. Yet this intimation makes absent casualties meaningful only in indicating the difficulty in comprehending unseen and distanced strikes. The ethical orientation towards casualties is narrowed to questions of what their absence possibly reveals about targeting mechanisms.

Another article perpetuates this logic, first stating that "the [drone] campaign has

killed over 1,500 people in Pakistan and Yemen” before immediately switching focus to the potential target, noting that “[t]he criteria used by the CIA and the military determining targets are closely guarded secrets” (Gorman, Entous and Barrett, 2013). This mention of secret criteria juxtaposes the implicit absence of the strikes that caused these deaths, creating a suspicion of further covertness. When this suspicion frames the statement that “U.S. officials sa[y] very few of those killed were civilians” (ibid), the latter intimates actual strikes and their absent casualties as having an unclear and potentially secreted relation to the category of civilian. But this intimation delimits interest in those tallied casualties to an interest in what they may imply about the extent of secrecy and uncertainties around the targeting procedure, not in the violence inflicted upon them.

More critical coverage, despite explicitly scrutinising the unclear definition of 'imminence', also inadvertently restricted consideration of absent casualties. One *Guardian* piece asserted that a secreted memo on drones discussed during Brennan's confirmation hearing “defined imminent threat broadly to include the possibility that if a suspect was not killed they could at some future date carry out an attack against the U.S.” (McGreal, 2013b). Alongside the suspicion that strikes are ongoing outside the public sphere, this rumour and its implicit lack of actual suspects intimates the possibility that people are being continually targeted through misleading definitions of imminence that belie claims of existential threat. Yet actual casualties are marginalised by being integrated into this intimated opacity in targeting criteria. Other implicitly critical articles perpetuated this focus: a *New York Times* piece noted Attorney General Eric Holder's assertion that “the president does not have the authority to kill a United States citizen on American soil who is not engaged in combat” but then qualifies this with the statement that “Mr. Holder did not say how the president would determine

who is an enemy combatant", ie. engaged in combat (Stevenson and Parker, 2013, emphasis added). With the suspicion that ongoing strikes are being kept secret, the implicit absence of the operating mechanisms that enact strikes becomes suggestive, hinting that selection procedures for targeting may be lax and thus secreted. The lack of any state rationalisation of secrecy thus allows traces of unseen strikes to undermine claims of precision. But this dynamic invites a focus not on the lived suffering of casualties but on what their absence might suggest about ongoing counter-terrorism procedures and their secretion. The focus is shifted to those 'confronted' with this intangible practice and its suggestive implications, not the infliction of violence.

This logic of marginalisation was repeated in earlier coverage of the revelation that President Obama was personally involved in the compiling of drone strike 'kill lists'. In the *New York Times* piece that broke the story, the "top-secret "nominations" process to designate terrorists for kill or capture" is characterised as an analysis of "mug shots and brief biographies [that] resembled a high school yearbook layout". President Obama is described as "approving every new name on an expanding "kill list", poring over terrorist suspects' biographies on what one official calls the macabre "baseball cards" of an unconventional war" (Becker and Shane, 2012). Framed as public traces of ongoing absent strikes, these sparse and abstracted details produce a suspicion of ongoing covertness around those strikes, with no accompanying state rationalisation of its use. This renders these details significant as public residue of covert actions, highlighting the public absence of those targeted through this procedure, their identities inscrutable within unseen "PowerPoint slides bearing [their] names, aliases and life stories". With these 'baseball cards' remaining out of view within a process characterised as surreal in its banality, "a grim debating society", this absence intimates the possibility that targets' identities are being secreted and even skewed or misunderstood through

their presentation within this “strangest of bureaucratic rituals” (ibid).

This allusion reshapes explicit claims that drone strikes reflect “American values” of “moral responsibility” in a fight against a “metastasizing enemy [in] new and dangerous lands” (ibid). That rationalisation is implicitly represented as bearing an unproven and possibly faulty relation to the slide-shows viewed by state officials in secret. But this intimation also shapes a narrow ethical orientation towards violence in those ‘dangerous lands’. As with lynching, this representation discursively distances unseen covert strikes from wider society: with these public traces hinting at unverifiable further secrecy, they produce a subject-position from which the practice is discomfiting on account of the suggestive but inaccessible workings of this insular and uncanny debating society. Actual absent casualties are marginalised, intimated only as reflecting the bizarre opacity of targeting. As one Telegraph piece commented, what is “deeply unsettling” about drone strikes is that “America has developed a *clinical, dispassionate procedure* for selecting... targets” (Blair, 2012, emphasis added).

Scrutinising the ephemeral

When news coverage turns to the ubiquitous figure of the drone pilot, strikes are represented as diffused events, existing across a variety of points in space and time. The popular image of “[u]nleashing hell from a padded seat in suburbia” (*The Sunday Times*, 2013) reflects on one level the significance that is attached to the pilot as “represent[ing] the ultimate secret of the military state – the figure who sees everything from nowhere” (Stahl, 2013: 664). Representations of strikes from the perspective of the pilot are also important, however, in that they figure her as representative of soldiers’ and CIA agents’ distancing from the violence of warfare. Coverage such as this incessantly asks “what is

must be like [for pilots] to sit in the virtual cockpit and fire missiles with a joystick from halfway around the world” before “go[ing] home and 'hav[ing] dinner with their families” (ibid: 670). This portrayal of the drone pilot's daily experience frames much of the public debate around these programmes.

While explicitly structuring the drone debate around the psychology of the pilot and the potential normalisation of state violence, these representations intimate covert strikes themselves through articulations of geographical distance and temporal slowness. As the news article quoted above emphasises, an “airbase in the suburbs of Syracuse, New York” is now “one of the front lines” of covert counter-terrorism, a place where “a US air pilot known only as Scott hunts down and kills people, identified as his country's enemies, 7,000 miles away” (*The Sunday Times*, 2013). The semi-anonymous and snippet quality of these details produces an implicit suspicion of secrecy surrounding Scott's and others' flights. At the same time, this characterisation of drone operations signifies an absence of actual strikes *through* this 7,000 mile distance, figuring these unseen events as having been dispersed across two distinct spaces. Fellow coverage represents the drone operator “pressing his button” and the second-and-a-half delay before “the Hellfire rocket erupt[s] from the aircraft he is controlling”. This hints at ongoing unseen strikes as existing only within that slowness of time, and in the “8,000 mile” distance separating drone from operator “at Creech Air Force Base in Nevada” (Bowcott and Lewis, 2011). Indeed, the apparent evanescence of strikes is often considered part of these programmes' greater significance. Coverage frequently characterises drones as weapons of war that dramatically reduce the density of actions involved in taking life, producing a “push-button conflict” (Macintyre, 2011), where “[a]ll it takes is a flick of the joystick and squeeze of the trigger” (*The Sunday Times*, 2013), allowing “the enemy [to] be engaged by the click of a mouse from an air-

conditioned bunker thousands of miles away” (Coughlin, 2013). As traces of implicit ongoing strikes, these abstracted references further signify the absence of more tangible traces or documentation of these events.

With these details framed as residue of strikes that were possibly secrets kept by the state, the absence of more specific traces becomes suggestive, intimating that this apparent slightness and diffuseness is potentially linked to that absence. Strikes are intimated as too spatially dispersed and evanescent to have left a substantial public mark. The secrecy produced through these snippets therefore becomes suggestive in its equivocal nature: it alludes to the unverifiable idea that the slightness and diffuseness of strikes contribute to their secrecy. Strikes are thus implicitly represented as significant in terms of being ephemeral. Within that significance, references to drones' “sophisticated cameras that beam back sometimes gruesome images [of both] insurgents [and] “collateral damage”” may hint at absent casualties, and even allude that such graphic images disturb and challenge an otherwise clinical and condensed decision-making process (*The Sunday Times*, 2013). But those casualties are intimated as relevant only in indicating and raising questions over the diffuseness and slightness of strikes. The violence inflicted upon casualties risks being marginalised, as newsreaders are prompted to focus on the discomfiting spatial and temporal intangibility of this practice.

As with representations of lynching, this representation of absent strikes as diffuse and slight events distances drone violence from wider society, focusing attention on the struggle to understand and scrutinise this practice. The idea that “[f]or the first time in US history, a president regularly signs off on the killing of named individuals... acting as judge, jury and executioner” (McGreal, 2013a), hints at the possibility of ongoing secrecy and signifies the public absence of those targeted individuals. This

secrecy frames this brief detail as suggestive, alluding to those targeted as remaining unknown in the public sphere, but insodoing it frames strikes as significant on account of their occurring regularly *without public awareness* – only the President is signing off on them. In the context of the above coverage, which represents strikes as lacking fixed spatial markers and substantial duration, this intimation represents strikes as ongoing but ephemeral: they appear to continue outside the public sphere but are possibly too slight and diffuse to comprehend. Newsreaders are invited to adopt the position of a public that is distanced from and cannot scrutinise these ephemeral events. The focus on this struggle to comprehend marginalises ethical consideration of casualties themselves; that marginalisation is itself obscured, since from this subject-position strikes are intelligible as irreducibly intangible events.

The barriers to public scrutiny were further intimated in discussion of the possibility of an “assassination court” (Foster, 2013) that could oversee the planning and conducting of covert strikes. This discussion again alluded to actual strikes in their temporal slughtness. “Most experts”, according to one *New York Times* article, “say judges do not have the alacrity or expertise to rule on a *frantic call from the C.I.A.* every time a terrorism suspect is in their sights” (Shane, 2012, emphasis added). With these articulations implicitly suggesting ongoing secrecy around strikes, they allude to those absent strikes in the image of a frantic phone-call as possibly too fleeting to be observed or to leave traces in the public sphere. Such fleetingness is further alluded to in references to the “speedy decisions” needed in response to “rapidly developing questions” over targeting as strikes unfold (Katy, 2013). This intimation implicitly represents covert strikes as intangible events on account of their sparse and indeterminate spatial and temporal boundaries. These representations consequently shape a subject-position from which these events make sense as being too ephemeral to

account for, positioning strikes as distant from and unconnected to a public that is trying to scrutinise them.

As with lynching coverage, the struggle to comprehend becomes the meaning of covert strikes, shaping a subject-position focused on uncontrollable ephemerality and its consequences for public scrutiny. These representations of the intangible spaces and moments of strikes allude to absent casualties only as emblems of these events' insubstantial existence. While these allusions implicitly undercut rationalisations of strikes' effectiveness, since that effectiveness cannot be confirmed in public, they narrow the ethical orientation that witnesses are prompted to adopt. Intimations represent strikes as distanced and disconnected from the public, made intelligible and significant through the suggestive but unverifiable implications of that distance. The marginalisation of casualties' violation is naturalised by that same representation of intangibility.

Disintegrating violence

When press coverage materialises the spaces where covert strikes have been carried out, this representational dynamic of distancing and marginalisation becomes more stark. Individual strikes are reported through sparse fragments of rumour, speculation and debris emanating from the sites where they occurred. These reports narrate strikes through the motif of the drone's missile hitting an object. "At least three missiles were fired at a house in the Shalam Raghzai region of South Waziristan, a semiautonomous mountainous tribal region straddling the border with Afghanistan", states a typical account in *The New York Times*. "[A] second attack struck a suspected militant compound in Wacha Dana, about seven miles northwest of Wana, the main town of

South Waziristan. At least 14 people were killed in the first two attacks, [Pakistani] officials said”, before “a drone fired at a vehicle at Darnashtra in the Shawal area” hours later, killing “at least four people”. These details, the report notes, “could not be independently verified” (Masood, 2011).

As events, these three strikes are discursively suspended at the moment of their disintegration, represented by the detonation of missiles and the implicit damage or destruction of buildings and vehicle. No other information extends their spatial and temporal dimensions beyond this moment; their truncated narration signifies a perceptual distance from these events and their full dynamics. With no U.S. state invocation in response to these claims, derived from local residents who officials say “do not necessarily provide accurate information” (ibid), a mere suspicion of secrecy is produced, framing this sparse local information as suggestive regarding the lacunae around those killed. In this framing, these statements intimate the suspected identities of casualties, “said to be foreigners” in hearsay fashion (ibid), as unconfirmed in the public sphere and as potentially shedding a different light on what has taken place unseen. Being intimated through the frozen moment of these events' disintegration, however, these absent bodies are figured as meaningful in indicating the ephemerality of these strikes, their being fleeting events that leave little in their wake from which one could deduce further details.

Other research has concluded that this sparse reporting in the aftermath of the event, mediated by anonymous local officials and detailing only material targets and casualty figures, epitomises the repetitive nature of coverage of individual drone strikes (Ahmad, 2016; Pope, 2016). The consequences of this sparse representation of strikes and casualties can be elucidated from coverage of strikes that includes photographs of the debris left in their wake. Stock photographs of indistinguishable drones in flight or

sitting inert in hangers are likely to prompt disinterest and disengagement, since they leave viewers “perpetually on the cusp of war” without ever meeting expectations by revealing that war's violent dynamism (Ohl, 2015: 620). Photographs of the aftermath of covert strikes, however, can perpetuate different dynamics, by inviting scrutiny of these spaces of residue that materialise independent of state channels of communication.

A typical photograph in *The Observer*, captioned “The wreckage of a car destroyed in an unmanned drone attack in Yemen a week ago”, hints at the unseen violence of a strike through its after-effects (Harris, 2013b; Figure 6). In affirming a strike occurred and then showing only an image of decayed wreckage, with the camera's angle occluding any wider social context, the representation alludes to the apparent lack of an enduring material marker at the site of the strike. References to independent groups' efforts to “track [drone] attacks” hint at state silence around this particular strike (ibid). The lack of movement within this space signifies just how unlike the supposed dynamism and eventfulness of the strike this image is, while the scopic focus on rusting metal implicitly signifies the potential anonymity of such residue, with nothing on the surface of the car indicating the characteristics of the strike that produced it. Indeed, this anonymity appeared to have real consequences, with *The Observer* attributing the wreckage to a strike on 3 February 2013 (Harris, 2013a), whereas *Reuters* later referred to the apparent original “February 3, 2013 file photo” as showing “wreckage of a car destroyed in 2012 by a U.S. drone air strike” (Bayoumy, 2013), most likely a strike on 30 March in Azan, Shabwa province (*The Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, 2012: YEM046).



Figure 6: Car wreckage in February 2013 from reported drone strike in Yemen the previous year (Bayoumy, 2013; cropped version in Harris, 2013a, b).

An *Associated Press* report of a strike in Yemen on 19 April 2014 carried a similar photograph of “a destroyed car”, contextualising it with claims that the strike “killed at least nine suspected al-Qaida militants and three civilians”. A security official quotes a “civilian survivor” as saying the strike “tossed [the SUV] some 20 metres... away”, producing “flying debris... while “explosions” continued for another 30 minutes” (*Associated Press*, 2014; Figure 7). Against these details, the burnt chassis of the vehicle signifies that the event itself has long passed, while its relative isolation within an otherwise-unremarkable space alludes to a dearth of material traces. The report ends by noting that “[t]here was no immediate U.S. comment on the strike”, with the U.S. “typically not” acknowledging “[strikes] done by the CIA” (ibid).



Figure 7: Car targeted by reported strike in Sawmaa area of al-Bayda province, Yemen, 19 April 2014 (*Associated Press*, 2014).

A *New York Times* report extends this representational dynamic, presenting an image captioned “Tribesmen On the Rubble of a Building Destroyed On Sunday in an American Drone Strike Against Suspected Militants in Shabwa Province in Southeastern Yemen” (Worth et al, 2013; Figure 8). The long flat plain emphasises the absence of the building by focusing attention on the low wide mound of bricks and the now-empty space they presumably once filled, while the people milling around the rubble signify the uneventfulness of the image, with the drone having seemingly long gone. The uneventful and indistinct quality of this residue again appeared to affect coverage, with the *Times* having to issue a correction stating that the building whose rubble was pictured was destroyed not in 2013, as originally reported, but two years earlier (*The New York Times*, 2013b).



Figure 8: Rubble of building hit by reported drone strike in south-eastern Yemen, 14 October 2011 (Worth et al, 2013; *The New York Times*, 2013b).

The visible marks of damage on all of these traces hint at dynamics of violence without being able to shown them. The state silence accompanying these reports produces a suspicion that these unseen events were secrets kept by the state from the public, framing this debris as significant in remaining in the public sphere and thus highlighting the absence of any markers of those targeted. This evidence of covertness thus implicitly signifies its inscrutability in relation to the claimed or unspoken identities of targets, intimating that casualties' identities perhaps could not easily be confirmed from this wreckage and rubble. This intimation shapes a subject-position of uncertainty over who was killed here and whether these secreted strikes achieved the professed aims of the covert programme. But in emerging from residue that highlights the scantness of public traces of these covert events, these intimations frame the strikes as too ephemeral, their footprints too insubstantial, for details and results to be confirmed in their wake. These events become meaningful in their seeming

intangibility, figuring absent casualties as significant only in indicating the struggle to comprehend what took place. This marginalisation is inconspicuous, since newsreaders are prompted to scrutinise the debris rather than consider how casualties are represented in their absence.

Even the more rapid reporting of strikes through social media extends this representational dynamic. A January 2015 strike in Marib, Yemen was initially reported by journalists on Twitter, with one re-tweeted image, captioned “Just after Marib drone strike against #AQAP”, showing black smoke rising from the horizon into an empty sky over the sparse town (Scahill, 2015a; Figure 9). The smoke perches on the brink of immateriality, signifying that the strike has been and gone unseen without leaving much tangible or enduring trace. Appearing close to dissipation, the residue of the strike endlessly hints at the violence of the event while implicitly emphasising just how little is left behind. With the sparsity of the report producing a suspicion of secrecy, and the space produced visually as secluded and distanced, this residue positioned far from the camera's eye alludes to the absence of the targeted bodies among these traces. This intimates the possibility that casualties' identities are inconclusive, and that such secluded spaces may be aiding those identities' secretion or the inability to verify claimed targets, with witnesses afforded only snatched images in the event's aftermath. But these intimations from less-than-material traces represent the event as ephemeral, by implicitly suggesting that such a strike occurs too quickly and leaves too little behind at its rumoured site. These intimations thus link the insubstantiality of the strike to the ambiguity over absent casualties, implicitly figuring strikes as intangible in-and-of-themselves. In a dynamic echoing lynching coverage, this marginalises the violence inflicted upon casualties by making the latter significant only in reflecting the sparseness and slightness of strikes. Witnesses are prompted to focus on the fact that

instead of targeted bodies, there is only ever smoke.



Figure 9: Smoke from reported drone strike in Marib, Yemen, 26 January 2015 (Scahill, 2015a).

Conclusion: 'a new way of warfare'

As covert drone strikes have become increasingly prominent in public portrayals of counter-terrorism strategy, news coverage and scholarly analysis have examined what this new prominence may inaugurate in terms of the waging of warfare. Drone strikes

are seen to offer “[a] radically different approach to warfare”, whereby “the bad guys are on the run without risking legions of boots on the ground” (D. Carr, 2013). Thus “warfare in the current era” includes “almost constant offensive measures” that “[fall] short of actual warfare” but nonetheless “regularly seek to damage or weaken rivals or gain an edge through violations of sovereignty and penetration of defences”. Such a development at “a level below “hot war” challenges both conventions in diplomacy and international law, not least regarding sovereignty” (*The Observer*, 2013). This notion of novelty is reflected in the titles of scholarly assessments, which point to drones as 'a frightening new way of war' which is 'transforming conflict, law, and policy' (Cohn 2015; Bergen and Rothenberg, 2014).

In this narration of strikes' significance, readers are addressed as a member of a public which has a stake in this ongoing change. This is a policy “operating largely under the public radar” (D. Carr, 2013), “prosecuted at the very margins of accountability... by secretive organisations... without defined goals or a willingness to discuss” (*The Observer*, 2013). 'Goodbye Cold War. Welcome to The Cool', one title addresses readers, affirming that “[w]e've entered a new era, in which death is delivered by drones... But what are the rules?” (Harnden, 2013, emphasis added). Such articulations, with their explicit and implicit claims of secrecy, shape a subject-position from which covert strikes 'make sense' as having brought the public into a new era of warfare *without their having been consulted*. Readers are prompted to feel dissatisfaction with this withholding: after all, it is “we” who “still don't have answers to the most basic questions about the lethal powers the Obama administration has claimed”, with drone policy having led to “controversial killings that the executive branch refuses to legally or morally *justify before the public*” (Crockford, 2013, emphases added). Implicitly, then, this covert violence is disconnected from and does not reflect upon that public.

As the foregoing analysis has demonstrated, this subject-position of being distanced and unable to comprehend is implicitly shaped by wider coverage of the covert drone programmes. Various public residue of strikes are framed by a suspicion that they relate to state secrets, turning what would otherwise seem like arbitrary remainders into public evidence of hidden activities. This framing allows equivocal absences within these traces to intimate unverifiable ideas about people and objects that appear absent from the public sphere: that casualties' identities cannot be confirmed from the few traces left by strikes, that those identities are being kept secret or remain unestablished by the state, and that covert actors' targeting mechanisms are not as infallible as is proclaimed. These possibilities undermine explicit claims of the accuracy and efficacy of covert strikes and curtail any wider rationalisation of these programmes in terms of exceptional but necessary counter-terrorism. Insodoing, these hints and allusions from absence figure unseen strikes as possibly too spatially diffuse and temporally slight, and leaving too little material trace, for anyone to establish 'what happened'. These intimations therefore shape a subject-position focused on the struggle to comprehend intangible covert violence.

This discursive dynamic that intimates strikes as ephemeral events has important consequences for any notion of ethical witnessing towards drone strike residue. The ethical orientations shaped by this coverage were examined here through an historical affiliation between covert strikes and lynching practice, based on shared absences and distancing in their representation. The explicit representation of lynching as an aberrant regional throwback to past forms of violence invited a national news-reading public in the United States to adopt a position from which the violence 'confronted' them in its aberrance, in its cutting against signs of supposed broader societal progress. This subject-position saw lynching as unnerving owing to its

confounding causes and implications, and consequently focused on the struggle to comprehend its dynamics.

The use of this historical affiliation reveals that covert drone strike coverage prompts a similar subject-position – not through explicit narration, but through inadvertent hints and allusions that reshape the explicit claims made about these programmes. The intimation of unseen strikes as ephemeral, evanescent and insubstantial events prompts witnesses of residue to understand these programmes as significant in terms of being too intangible to comprehend. As with lynching, this shapes a narrow ethical orientation towards strikes: absent casualties are intimated as merely reflecting the intangibility of strikes, marginalising the violence inflicted upon them from the meaning and significance of the practice. This marginalisation is made inconspicuous, since witnesses are prompted to scrutinise the rumours and debris left behind by strikes and thus to consider their own spatial, temporal and ultimately moral distance from these events, as suggested by the equivocal absences in that residue, rather than consider how casualties are represented in their absence. Because this meaning-making occurs implicitly, it goes unnoticed; the historical affiliation with lynching challenges this obscuration, by highlighting how absent casualties are positioned within the significance afforded strikes without that positioning being explicitly stated or visualised.

The intimations produced by this representational dynamic undercut articulations from the state which try to pre-condition understandings of covert strikes in line with some state rationale. While a rationalisation of 'targeted killing' is intermittently offered in the abstract, without reference to specific drone programmes, the state does not invoke a rationale for any secrecy surrounding unseen strikes. Covertness is thus represented through inference from the residue left behind by

strikes, without an accompanying state rationale for its use. This allows that suspected secrecy to help materialise spaces and identities that exceed the internal rationalisation of drone violence, as predominantly studied in critical scholarship. But because strikes are represented through non-state public traces, they complicate the question of ethical responsiveness towards state violence. These traces do not prompt public assent towards state actions, but nor do they invite dissent – only uncertain discomfort at strikes' ephemerality and insubstantial public footprint. Nor are casualties being dehumanised or effaced. Rather, witnesses are prompted to adopt a subject-position from which strikes match Jacqueline Goldsby's description of lynching as having been both “horrifying and banal” (Goldsby, 2006: 27): horrifying in that both forms of violence are represented as discomfiting because confounding; banal in that witnesses' ethical orientation towards absence is narrowed to discomfort with intangibility, not ethical consideration of the violence inflicted upon casualties in-and-of-itself. Absent casualties become significant not in their being violated but in their reflecting that intangibility.

Ethical witnessing in this case would need to involve not dissent from the state's rationalisation of its violence – which is already undermined by allusions from residue – but an awareness of how residue already invites witnesses to see casualties as implicitly relevant or not. Just as with lynching, rather than accept strikes as distanced from the public, an ethical witnessing would need to acknowledge how residue connects witnesses to these unseen events.

Chapter 4

Finding and hiding the body: suspicion and opacity in the bin Laden raid

On the afternoon of May 1 2011 local time, President Obama and his national security team sat in front of monitors in the basement of the White House's West Wing. They were watching what was to be an historic moment in the history of the U.S.'s efforts to militarily defeat the al Qaeda franchise. It was the early morning of May 2 in Pakistan, where twenty-five U.S. Navy SEALs were being transported by helicopter to the suspected location of Osama bin Laden (CNN, 2013). President Obama watched via Sentinel drone surveillance footage and helmet-mounted cameras as those SEALs landed beside a large compound in the town of Abbottabad, made their way swiftly up the floors of the compound's main building, blowing up doors and shooting dead four residents before they reached the bedroom of the world's most-wanted terrorist.

Except President Obama wasn't watching this, at least not all of it. A couple of days after the raid that left Osama bin Laden dead was publicly announced, then-head of the CIA Leon Panetta revealed that the live feed from the Navy SEALs' cameras was cut off once they entered the compound. "[T]here was a time period of almost 20 or 25 minutes where we really didn't know just exactly what was going on... We had some observation of the approach there, but we did not have direct flow of information as to the actual conduct of the operation itself as they were going through the compound" (quoted in Swinford, 2011a). Obama and his team were not looking at footage of the raid as it happened; they certainly didn't see bin Laden being shot dead by one of the SEALs as they entered his bedroom.

The confusion over what exactly President Obama was watching on those television monitors, and the contradicting of initial claims that he saw bin Laden die, aptly reflect the public image of the raid on the Abbottabad compound. This was a rare event in terms of contemporary covert action: a covert operation that *was* officially acknowledged by the state, with the U.S. revealing it had taken place and publicising certain details, from descriptions of what happened to photographs of Obama's national security team monitoring the raid from afar. Part of the event's public significance lay in its publicising the activities of the Joint Special Operations Command, with coverage singling out JSOC's Naval Special Warfare Development Group, known by its predecessor's name Navy SEAL Team Six, which undertook the raid under CIA authority (Dilanian, 2011; Scahill, 2013: 452). This publicising is significant considering that SEAL Team Six had already carried out ten to twelve operations within Pakistan; shortly after the raid, outgoing head of U.S. Special Operations Command Eric Olson revealed that SOCOM, of which JSOC is a subsidiary, was conducting around a dozen such covert kill/capture operations every night, though mostly in Iraq and Afghanistan (Shachtman, 2011; Travers, 2011). The Abbottabad raid, in other words, was a rare glimpse into the covert counter-terrorist activities of U.S. special forces. It stands out in the overall argument of this thesis for the same reason: this event and the secrecy surrounding it *were* addressed by the state to the public, with President Obama announcing the raid through a live press conference.

At the same time, as the above comments on Obama watching the raid indicate, this acknowledgement of the operation circulated alongside a number of ambiguities and contradictions surrounding the action. Claims would be made that were later retracted or altered; eyewitness testimonies could not explain what exactly people had seen; images were uncovered that failed to clarify what had happened or what they even

showed. This was a covert operation revealed and then represented through its residue of rumour, speculation and inscrutable objects and images. Because of this, it was an operation announced to the public but remaining opaque. Surrounding the opacity of this residue was the official state acknowledgement not just that the raid had occurred, but that a key piece of residue was being kept hidden by the state: bin Laden's mutilated and mortally wounded body. This secretion was addressed to the public through state invocations of a rationale, not for the covertness of the operation, but for the *covering up* of some of its remainders. The secrecy of the state, then, was produced in a unique way: it was officially broken regarding the event itself, then justified regarding one body, before appearing in coverage alongside other residue which was *not* acknowledged by the state and that remained contradictory or seemingly inscrutable. It is the discursive dynamic produced between the secretion of the body and residue of the raid that concerns the present chapter.

The potential for representations of the raid to be shaped by both acknowledged secrecy and its visible traces has not been considered by previous research into the raid's existence in public discourse. Prior analyses have focused primarily on the official U.S. articulations of the raid, documenting those articulations and suggesting the most likely interpellations of the public from them. In arguing that the U.S. fostered public complicity by framing the raid as heroic and legitimate, Hasian Jr. argues that hiding bin Laden's body prevented alternative readings – that secrecy, as a tool of the state, discouraged further questioning (Hasian Jr., 2012: 1805, 1807). Hasian Jr. cites Rancière's example of the police attempting to discourage public interest in an event by shouting: 'Move along! There is nothing to see here!'. But Rancière's point is that such an appeal “recall[s] the obviousness of what is there”, that is, it invites the public to think that something *is* worth seeing (Rancière, 2010: 37, emphasis in original). This is the

argument of the present chapter: that the visible hiding of bin Laden's body could potentially prompt the public to be suspicious towards that act of hiding.

Jarvis and Holland get closer to the vein of this chapter, arguing that U.S. discourse subsumed the circumstances of bin Laden's killing within discussions of his death's political ramifications, with officials referring to the raid not in “descriptive, corporeal ways” but through allusion (Jarvis and Holland, 2014: 443). This chapter expands this notion of allusions to bin Laden's death and body by looking at public discourse more broadly, analysing all articles discussing the raid in eighteen British national newspapers over the first week of press coverage of the operation. While the analyses discussed above see state secrecy as something instigated and shaped by the state, the present analysis looks at how the official acknowledgement of hiding interacted with other residue that hinted equivocally at wider secrecy, reshaping the meaning attached to the state's secretion.

To examine this interaction, the chapter extends the historical affiliation used thus far through a particular representational aspect of early- to mid-twentieth century lynchings in the United States. Examining how analyses of recent covert counter-terrorism have drawn on lynching photography to propose a parallel between the two practices, this chapter makes the case for rethinking this parallel, basing it not on the *visualisation* of bodies but on their *secretion*. The representational power of lynching photographs stemmed not solely from the ability to display bodies in particular ways but from that suppression of that documentation, so that the meaning attached to those bodies by lynchers could not easily be contested. Secretion was an act of indicating who had the authority to see, and to determine the meaning of, violence. This representational dynamic can be shown to be at work in representations of the Abbottabad raid, with the secretion of bin Laden's body acting to restrict the potential

for that body to signify things other than what the Obama administration intended of it. The other residue of the raid that circulated in the public sphere, however, was able to intimate that secreted body, to allude to both it and the absent Navy SEALs, and insodoing to invite witnesses to consider the possibility that this unseen body might signify things beyond the state's own articulations.

As the chapter details, intimations of bin Laden's body had two representational consequences: it prompted newsreaders to understand the act of secretion as a precarious attempt to control meaning, thus undermining the perceived validity of that meaning; and it suggested to witnesses that state secretion was preventing public understanding of various other public traces of the raid. The absent body of bin Laden, in other words, carried meaning in excess of that assigned to it through its secretion and by more explicit articulations of the raid and its significance. Yet this excess meaning did not invite dissent towards the raid. Rather, the dynamic between the acknowledged secretion of bin Laden's body and other opaque residue shaped a subject-position of suspicion. The implicit emphasis on the potential meanings of bin Laden's body invited readers to see that unverifiable meaning and its possible suppression as key to the raid's significance. Other residue, meanwhile, prompted a focus on the possible meaning and secretion of other absentees, such as the aims and tactics of the Navy SEALs themselves. With the raid explicitly framed by both the Obama administration and news coverage as reflecting a victory for a civilised counter-terrorist state over a cowardly and hypocritical Islamist terrorism, these suspicions were likely to shape a subject-position of uncertainty over this story and its attendant identities. While coverage of drone strikes shaped a subject-position focused on the struggle to comprehend ephemeral events, coverage of the Abbottabad raid shaped a subject-position of suspicion over how absent residue might actually reflect on the narratives and identities being used to

explain the significance of the raid. The violence of the operation, however, was made meaningful only in terms of this self-absorbed suspicion that witnesses' understanding of that violence was being obstructed by secrecy; other ethical questions surrounding the use of force at Abbottabad were marginalised.

Lynching, Abu Ghraib, and the violated body

The significance of bin Laden's death is that in the recent past, such covert acts of 'just punishment' have been represented publicly through *visible* violated bodies. Rather than remain resolutely unknown, covert practices in the months and years following 11 September 2001 have become symbolised through 'iconic glimpses' (Bhattacharyya, 2008) of them being enacted, glimpses centring on the bodies of those affected. The rendition and detention of so-called 'enemy combatants' at the Guantánamo Bay prison became intelligible in public debate largely through images of shackled and kneeling detainees clad in orange jumpsuits and glimpsed through barbed-wire fencing, surrounded by U.S. military personnel (Van Veen, 2011: 1729-39). Whereas such snippets of actual covert practices would have been rare in public discourse during the Cold War, these glimpses have circulated relatively freely over the past fifteen years such that they have become ubiquitous. To be sure, these images and testimonies remain only the tip of the iceberg so far as these covert practices go, but their portrayal of actual state covert operations marks a significant development.

That real violated bodies should form part of the mediation of covert action prompts the question of how they shape the public meaning of these operations. The violence at the heart of these covert practices is not exactly obfuscated in these representations; the image of restrained and downcast detainees certainly imparts

something of the treatment of these bodies. As discussed in the first chapter, these glimpses of covert action have been contextualised by state refusals to confirm or deny what they indicate about the actions undertaken by covert agents. These refusals, however, carry abstracted or generalised justifications for treating bodies in ways corresponding to the treatment hinted at by these glimpses. Refusing to confirm or deny acts as a way of admitting what may be inadmissible, legally or morally, without confirming specific practices or offering clear lines of responsibility (Bhattacharyya, 2008: 117-9). With lines of accountability rendered untraceable, all that is left are displays of those violated bodies and appeals to the identity of 'enemy combatants' as an abstract justification for *possible* 'exceptionalist' violence. This pre-conditioning of public discourse frames violated bodies as encapsulating the stakes of and rationale for the violence, despite being visible only in snippets of a largely-obscured and unconfirmed practice (ibid: 124).

Framed as iconic glimpses of these practices, violated bodies become defined by their physical vulnerability. Images of the Guantánamo prisoners represent this practice as incontestable, since they are framed as only hinting at the practice's wider dynamics while leaving unclear any lines of responsibility therein. Contextualised as showing how certain bodies can now be treated, these figures are defined by that treatment, by the lack of control over and defence of their own bodies. As such, they become metonyms for the downtrodden position of certain social groups, of particular configurations of sex, race and class, whose relative position in society is embodied in this treatment (Alexander, 1994). As witnesses are invited to understand these bodies through general justifications for the differential treatment of 'enemy combatants', a social group is thus defined on the basis of shared physical vulnerability, representing the identities of those visualised by their mere corporeality. This representation in turn shapes a subject-

position whose understanding and affect unwittingly reiterates the rationale for the violence. That these snippets signify that much of the violence remains unseen prompts witnesses to react with horror at what else might be happening in secret. This reaction risks producing an identity schema of a civilised Western collective that normally would not carry out such barbaric acts – that this incongruity between identity and action is why these practices are so upsetting and why they are being conducted largely in secret (Bhattacharyya, 2008: 139-41).

In the period following the 11 September 2001 attacks, a number of covert counter-terrorist practices have become knowable to the public through similar snippets of violated bodies. The one which has come to exemplify the dynamic outlined above is the torture of detainees at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. In the handful of images that have become ubiquitous symbols of this torture (despite being only a fraction of the digital photographs taken at the prison by military personnel), prisoners appear to be posing in positions of humiliation and subservience relative to prison guards. This apparent posing – whereby detainees walk on their hands and knees with dog collars around their necks, or simulate homosexual sex acts with one another – has led analyses to conclude that these images are intended as 'proof' of the depravity and bestiality, and therefore moral inferiority, of the prisoners. Poses of prisoners' willing subordination to prison guards are designed as evidence of those prisoners' interiority, justifying their very treatment in this way (Carrabine, 2011: 15-18). While a public reaction of outrage would short-circuit this meaning-making, analysts have argued that as iconic glimpses of detainee treatment, these photographs nonetheless signify that the sexualised and animalistic poses therein are emblematic of the torture, that these meanings indicate why the violence *is* torture (Bhattacharyya, 2008: 128-30). As such, these images represent detainees as experiencing this treatment as torture *because* of the

meanings implied by these poses; thus the violence becomes intelligible as 'revealing' the sexualised racial identities of detainees, as sexually-repressed Muslim males (P. Owens, 2010). Thus the identity schema which actually underpins the state's rationalisation of this treatment is reiterated. This analytic suggests that the public circulation of such violated bodies condemns them to a demonised (because racialised and gendered) and dehumanised (because defined by their corporeal vulnerability) identity.

Once again, the mediated witnessing of bodies in pain reiterates an understanding of those bodies which matches the rationale of the violence itself. In making this argument about Abu Ghraib, scholars have pointed to a parallel with the photographic documentation of lynchings in the United States. This parallel has been built on the foundations of a commentary by Susan Sontag (2004), in which she likens the photographs of grinning U.S. soldiers standing beside degraded detainees to photographs of white Americans standing nonchalantly beneath dead and mutilated black bodies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Sontag argues that similar aesthetic composition of these images reflects a shared representational dynamic that prompts witnesses to accept configurations of identity implied by the violence, becoming participants in discursive violence. Sontag nonetheless posits a significant difference between the two sets of photographs: while lynching photographs were “trophy... taken by a photographer in order to be collected, stored in albums, displayed”, the Abu Ghraib photos are “less objects to be saved than messages to be disseminated, circulated” (Sontag, 2004: 27).

Sontag's distinction has provoked counter-arguments. Hazel Carby directly addresses it by arguing that lynching photographs were equally intended to be circulated publicly, and that therefore the Abu Ghraib photos stand as “direct descendants of the postcards of lynched black bodies”, with both sets of photos acting as

“images and messages to be shared – in celebration or as a warning” (Carby, 2004).

Further articles in subsequent years have reiterated a link between lynching documentation and the scenes of Abu Ghraib, characterising both as celebrations of a collective white supremacy over downtrodden non-white bodies, but have disagreed over whether this celebratory role operates through these photograph's use as private souvenirs or through their public dissemination and display (see Apel, 2005; Feldman, 2005; Razack, 2005; Gordon, 2006; Mirzoeff, 2006; Philipose, 2007; Pugliese, 2007).

The analytic discussed earlier suggests that images of violated bodies in subordinate poses can reiterate this celebratory rationale in either guise: as private souvenirs, they can act as proof of bodies' moral depravity; as public documents, they can signify the vulnerable cultural dispositions of those photographed. What this disagreement in the literature hints at, however, is the question of *how* this dynamic of essentialised physical vulnerability is enacted. It is unclear whether the mode of dissemination, be it public circulation or private secretion, is part of or even essential to this dynamic, or whether this meaning-making is simply a product of how bodies are visualised in any case.

It is a mistake to think that visualising the violated body is what gives these photographs their terroristic power, that is, their ability to act either as celebrations of one social group's domination over another or as evidence of the latter's incontestable treatment. In the case of lynching, the corpse of the lynch victim carries a dual representational dynamic, being both a *source* of the dehumanisation of black Americans and *evidence* of that dehumanisation, an archive of white patriarchal identity in parts of the U.S. that demonstrates how that identity relied on terror for its own reiteration as 'civilised' in opposition to black 'barbarity' (Rushdy, 2012: 66). This dual dynamic indicates the violated body's ability to signify things in excess of any meaning explicitly ascribed to it. The desecrated body does not intrinsically signify black identity as

incontestably vulnerable. Having been violated, the body carries the mark of an attempt by lynching perpetrators to make it signify a particular meaning; the body reflects a kind of discursive labour, of trying to fix the body's meaning for a particular audience.

The case of Emmett Till indicates this discursive labour, with Till having been lynched in 1955 during a visit to Mississippi, in an apparent attempt by his killers to reinforce a particular racial and sexual social order that the bodies of Northern black men were seen to implicitly threaten (Harold and DeLuca, 2005: 270-71). When publicly displayed during his funeral at the request of his mother, and later when photographs were disseminated in radical black publications, Till's body was able to signify in excess of that intended by his murderers, with his body framed as revealing this discursive labour to a national black audience. This act of public display invited that audience to embrace Till's body, not as another piece of evidence of incontestable white supremacy, but as a grotesque indicator of the fraudulence of white Americans' claim to moral superiority in light of their own acts of barbarism (ibid: 280-83). Till's body, in other words, refused to play the role intended of it by Till's murderers. Social inferiority on the basis of physical vulnerability was revealed to be not an incontrovertible fact of life but a precarious message that had to be reiterated by acts of terrorism.

The meaning and identity attached to violated bodies are therefore a product not simply of those bodies' visualisation but of articulations which pre-empt those bodies' meaning, which prompt witnesses to see bodily characteristics as signifying particular things (Rancière, 2009: 84-5). It cannot be assumed that the Abu Ghraib photographs shape a subject-position which accepts the identity terms implied by the violence's enactment. Witnesses must be prompted to understand the represented body in the proper way. Even when pre-conditioned, that body can signify in excess of that intended of it by being framed as contradicting explicit claims of moral superiority, or

as reflecting more widely on society. This is why lynchers and those supportive of lynchings went to such trouble to qualify photographs with captions and post-process manipulation (adding and removing visual elements) that made clear what the photograph was *supposed* to say (Goldsby, 2006: 263-79). Different qualifications could therefore 'teach' other witnesses to read these photographs such that this discursive labour was revealed, undermining (though never entirely erasing) their terrorising power in the process (Rushdy, 2012: 69-70). These representational dynamics must be analytically acknowledged for any parallel between lynching and covert counter-terrorism to robustly elaborate the representational power of the latter.

The potential for the violated body to signify multiple meanings allows for an expansion of the historical affiliation between contemporary covert counter-terrorism and lynching. As detailed previously using scholarship on the national representational dynamics of lynching, the majority of lynching's visual documentation was not circulated publicly but instead secreted among communities sympathetic to this violence. Lynching photographs were most likely disseminated through private transactions between photographers and local residents wanting a souvenir of a particular lynching, as well as through the mailing of picture postcards between friends and family members (Simpson, 2004; Kim, 2012). These distribution methods ensured that these photographs were seen only when sympathetic white owners and distributors wanted it, and only in specific fora (Goldsby, 2006: 248-9). Without that documentation, black communities would have found it more difficult to contest the meaning of lynched bodies and the practice as a whole, since they could neither highlight the discursive labour of those who framed these images nor re-contextualise those visualised bodies as evidence of barbarism. Because black audiences were unable to control when and how they gained access to these images, this secretion of

documentation signified who had the right to see these bodies *and determine their meaning* for themselves. Secretion was therefore a likely source of these images' representational power: that photographs of bodies were circulating but remained inaccessible ensured that the visualisation and meaning of violated black bodies could be neither controlled nor contested; knowledge of that secret circulation and lack of control would likely have reiterated the social inferiority of black citizens (ibid: 249-50).

The possibility that lynching's terroristic function partly lay in the secretion of its bodily evidence deepens the historical affiliation between lynching and covert counter-terrorism. The thesis' association of these two forms of violence, prompted by their shared absences and significations of distance, now allows us to examine obscured representational dynamics stemming from the hiding of bodies. The secretion of a violated body speaks to that body's potential to signify meaning in excess of anything ascribed to it through explicit rationalisations of that violence. Perpetrators' awareness of this potential leads them to secrete the body, as in the case of Emmett Till, whose killers hid his body by weighting it down in the nearby river, presumably intending for it never to be found. Indeed, by the mid-twentieth century, the absent body was designed to fulfil the dual celebratory and terroristic function previously performed by the most public spectacle lynchings, with “[h]istory” having “taught both blacks and whites how to fill in the blanks” and understand the meaning of the body gone missing. In this context, “[r]umour and speculation now performed the rhetorical violence formerly exacted by the public lynching” (Harold and DeLuca, 2005: 269). With the body secreted, rumours and speculations of unseen violence could define that violence for a wider population while restricting the potential for alternative readings. This restriction, however, relied on one other factor: that the rumours, speculation and other things left in the wake of unseen lynchings did not allow that secreted body to 're-

emerge'. Public traces of the violence which portrayed characteristics of the hidden body could undermine the meaning intended for that body through its secretion by perpetrators, by re-contextualising the act of secretion itself and highlighting that act's own discursive labour, as an attempt to obscure other meanings of the body.

Drawing on this idea of secretion's discursive role in the case of lynching, and of the potential for violated bodies to undermine the discursive labour of violence's perpetrators, this chapter re-frames analysis of the killing of Osama bin Laden. Rather than focus on how official proclamations from the Obama administration appeared to define bin Laden's death in terms of triumphalism, this chapter uses an historical affiliation with lynching to examine representational dynamics that stemmed from the *secretion* of bin Laden's body, and from the public debate that circled around this open secrecy. On the one hand, keeping bin Laden's corpse hidden, viewed only by select administration and Congress members, curtailed any potential alternative readings of that body, as well as the potential for the body to undercut the claims relayed by state officials. On the other hand, the state's articulated rationale for that secretion entered public discourse alongside other residue which was *not* acknowledged by the state. This juxtaposition between rationale and residue was able to intimate bin Laden's absent body in ways that reshaped the meaning of its secretion by framing the latter as discursive labour, as a state attempt to prevent certain interpretations of bin Laden's death. The role of secretion was therefore cast under suspicion. While this revealing of perpetrators' discursive labour occurred explicitly in the case of lynching, such a dynamic may be less obvious in the contemporary case. This historical affiliation can therefore be used to identify whether this dynamic is active in coverage of the bin Laden raid in ways that go unnoticed, through unspoken allusions to absent bodies that reshape the meaning of those absentees.

Accounting for a 'lightning raid'

The raid of the Abbottabad compound was widely interpreted as an assertion of control over the meaning of bin Laden's body. As Rebecca Adelman details, the small but steady stream of images and videotapes of bin Laden released in the years following 11 September 2001 consistently ruptured U.S. state narratives of its counter-terrorism efforts. The uncontrollable appearance of bin Laden's image in the public sphere, and these videos' equivocal hints as to his location and physical health, implicitly signified both his physical evasiveness and the lack of information about his intentions and involvement in the planning of new terrorist attacks (Adelman, 2012: 772-5). This meaning was acknowledged by news coverage which interpreted the videos defiant taunts to America or the West (eg. Watson and McIntyre, 2001; Jeffreys, 2001; Palmer and Kolirin, 2002; D. Gardner, 2004; Shipman, 2007). So long as bin Laden was able to disseminate images of himself in the public sphere, his body would continue to undermine narratives of the superiority of the U.S.'s counter-terrorism capabilities relative to al Qaeda. With the announcement of his death, that usurping of a U.S. state narrative was supposed to end.

The press evoked this history of evasion in their initial coverage of the raid, with headlines declaring 'After months of preparation, a lightning raid of deadly precision' (Rayner and Harnden, 2011), '40-minute raid that ended ten years of defiance' (Greenhill et al, 2011) and 'Osama bin Laden: it took years to find him but just minutes to kill him' (MacAskill, 2011a). Yet in characterising the raid by its slight temporality, these headlines highlight that the event is historically significant but has passed unseen and undocumented for public consumption. The covert quality of the operation was implicitly emphasised from the beginning.

That knowledge of the raid remained partial even once it was officially acknowledged is reflected in initial news accounts, whose use of sparse White House and Pentagon details is embellished with evocative re-enactments. Describing the “heavy cloud rolling in over the town of Abbottabad” as creating “perfect conditions for the raid”, one emblematic *Daily Mail* account figuratively follows in the Navy SEALs' footsteps, from their having “been training extensively for days” using “a detailed mock-up of Bin Laden's hideaway”, through various “dummy runs”, to their flying into Tarbela Ghazi airbase in north-western Pakistan before the raid (Greenhill et al, 2011). The narrative describes how “sleeping citizens” were woken by “the clatter of four military helicopters thought to be two Black Hawks and two Chinooks”, how President Obama experienced “a heart-stopping moment” as the compound's guards opened fire and shot down one of the Black Hawks, and finally how “[t]wo dozen U.S. Navy SEALs – special forces – wearing night-vision goggles dropped into the high-walled compound by sliding down ropes from Chinooks... storm[ing] inside to secure the terror chief's hideaway room by room” (ibid). Yet having led readers through the Navy SEALs' operations, the implicit narrative pay-off of 'taking out bin Laden' is conspicuous in its absence. Instead, the narrative abruptly cuts to a note that “[f]ollowing the shootout with Bin Laden, his body was carried out and taken away in one of the helicopters” (ibid; for a similar account, see Walsh, MacAskill and Addley, 2011). Without a description of the moment of bin Laden's death, the juxtaposition between the claim of that death and this absence leaves the narrative implicitly incomplete, hinting at ongoing secrecy around the ostensible key moment of the raid.

Despite this narrative lack in early accounts of the raid, the White House did release snippets of bin Laden's final moments that journalists drew upon to represent bin Laden's body in its absence. These details came closest to rendering his body such

that it would prompt an understanding of al Qaeda through his own physical vulnerability. These articulations built on bin Laden's seclusion, since they ascribed characteristics to the al Qaeda leader without allowing witnesses access to his body to verify its meaning. So instead of releasing photographs of the corpse, "US officials sa[id] – and there is no independent verification of this fact – he was shot twice, once in the chest and once in the head" (Walsh, MacAskill and Addley, 2011). The descriptions of this final moment, whereby bin Laden "was killed with a precision shot just above the left eye, which removed part of his skull" (Ingham, 2011), reduces his body to its vulnerable corporeality. Coupled with statements of bin Laden's terroristic affiliation, these descriptions define his metonymic identity by that wrecked corporeality. These statements would therefore appear to reiterate state control over a body now rendered passive; as with lynching practice, the seclusion of the body prevents alternative readings.

Subsequent snippets of information, however, alluded to uncertainty over the meaning and significance of the raid. It first emerged that the precise nature of the violence described above was unclear, with differing statements as to where bin Laden was shot on his body and how many times (Rayner, Swinford and Evans, 2011). More significantly, bin Laden's actions in those final moments were placed in doubt such that the meaning of his absent body was implicitly questioned. The Obama administration's initial account of the raid described bin Laden as having violently fought back against the Navy SEALs, using one of his wives as a human shield (Ingham and Flanagan, 2011). These details led to journalistic descriptions of bin Laden "screaming and firing his AK47 at the attackers" before "[t]he cowardly al-Qaeda chief grabbed his youngest wife Amal al-Sadah to use her as a shield" (C. Hughes and Myall, 2011). But the White House quickly altered this account, revealing that not only was bin Laden not hiding behind his

wife when the SEALs entered his bedroom, he actually wasn't armed. These contradictions led coverage to ask how he could have 'resisted' those SEALs as the White House continued to insist, as well as whether adequate provisions had been made to try to capture rather than kill him (Peake and Pollard, 2011; Rayner, Swinford and Evans, 2011).

By undermining previous characterisations of bin Laden's behaviour that demonstrated his 'evil' and terroristic nature, these further snippets signified the equivocal absence of bin Laden's body and anything connected to it that would have aided his resistance. With these contradictions framed as significant traces of an event that had been conducted in secret, they alluded to bin Laden's absent body as possibly undermining the state's account. This allusion was boosted by U.S. officials' attempts to account for these contradictions, which further hinted at the discursive labour of secreting documentation of the raid. In reports of the White House briefing that corrected the state's narrative, spokesman Jay Carney was described as having "added a crucial detail. "Bin Laden was then shot and killed. He was not armed," Carney disclosed. Asked how he had resisted if he had no gun, Carney declined to specify but said resistance does not require a gun" (MacAskill, 2011b). Juxtaposing explanations of the raid as a re-assertion of control over bin Laden's body, these details intimated that absent body as not playing the role intended of it in state accounts, as possibly contradicting those accounts. In a representational dynamic mirroring contests over the meaning of lynchings, the secrecy that appeared to surround the raid was implicitly reframed as reflecting an effort to prevent alternative readings of the body and the event's significance. Carney's insistence that resistance does not require a firearm is framed by these intimations as such an effort to control meaning, thus undermining the state account by implicitly emphasising that the nature of that 'resistance' remains

unknown.

Subsequent declarations from the White House revealed that bin Laden had been interpreted as resisting when he ran back into his bedroom upon seeing the Navy SEALs in the corridor. The justification given for this interpretation by a member of the Senate intelligence committee further alluded to the discursive labour of secretion. The statement is noteworthy in its defensiveness: “*What you have to remember* is that it was pitch dark. When they got into the room with bin Laden, they already had to go through some other folks downstairs, two of whom they killed... By the time they got to him, *they didn't know what they would find*” (quoted in Swinford, 2011b, emphases added). The tone of the statement juxtaposes the suspicion of secrecy signified by these continued modifications of the official state account. That juxtaposition intimates the suggestive idea that absent documentation of the raid, the images and video footage taken by the Navy SEALs, might reveal a sequence of events unrecognisable as a heroic defeat of terroristic defiance, as explicitly claimed by White House and Pentagon sources. Contradictions in the details released by the state therefore risked implicitly framing the secrecy surrounding the raid as an attempt to obscure cracks in that state narrative. Even before press coverage attended to the invisibility of bin Laden's body, the latter's absence was affecting the meaning of the event.

Finding and fixing the body

As noted, the ability of bin Laden to have evaded capture for so long formed a large part of the reported significance of the raid. The raid was represented as the end of a long and arduous manhunt: as one *Independent* article put it the day after the death was announced, “for all but a tiny number of people, until yesterday morning, for any sort of

certainty on the whereabouts of the man who earned the title of the world's most wanted, one had to go all the way back to December 2001" (Buncombe, 2011). This referred to the period of fighting between coalition forces and Taliban and al Qaeda fighters in the Tora Bora mountains, during which bin Laden managed to slip away. In lieu of many concrete details on the raid itself, coverage contextualised his death by turning to CIA and U.S. Army efforts to track down bin Laden after his escape, and in particular to *visualise* his hidden body. This coverage framed that visualisation as key to the U.S. asserting control over bin Laden and the meaning of his body.

That bin Laden had remained so elusive for so long, leaving U.S. soldiers "snatching at thin air" in 2001 as they searched for evidence of his demise in Tora Bora (Rayner, 2011), implicitly put further importance on bin Laden's discovery constituting an assertion of U.S. control through visualisation. Press accounts of the CIA's operations at Abbottabad explicitly represented those al Qaeda members who surrounded bin Laden as haphazard and bumbling in their efforts to remain invisible, contrasting with the professional and technical expertise of their pursuers. Accounts of the trail that led to Abbottabad focused on the courier whose family lived with bin Laden's in the compound and whose name was given away by detainees at Guantánamo Bay. Having been "key to maintaining bin Laden's secrecy for almost 10 years", this courier was portrayed as having slipped up "[w]hen he made a phone call in 2010 [and] unknowingly led the Americans to the doorstep of the world's most wanted terrorist" (Ross, 2011).

Yet these snippets of detail about CIA efforts contained ambiguities that alluded to meanings other than U.S. technical superiority. On discovering the Abbottabad compound, the CIA did not know who was inside it, believing only that "someone extremely important" was living there (Sengupta, 2011). Once they suspected it was bin Laden, the CIA set up a safe-house nearby in order to confirm his presence. This is

described as involving “monitor[ing]” and “extensive surveillance” by the patient and professional CIA agents, who had at their disposal “an arsenal of hi-tech equipment including telephoto lenses, eavesdropping devices and radars”, the aim being “to “find and fix” Bin Laden” (Walsh, 2011b). Yet “[d]espite the intense surveillance the CIA was unable to obtain a photograph of Bin Laden or a recording of the man, presumed to be the al-Qaida leader, who lived on the second and third floors” (ibid). Having positioned bin Laden's visualisation as key to ending his evasion and reasserting U.S. superiority, this coverage acknowledged that agents failed to identify bin Laden's bodily markers before the raid, implicitly undermining the characterisation of those agents' superior skills and technical capabilities. Given the absence of bin Laden's body from the public sphere after the raid, these attempts at contextualisation implicitly represented that body in its absence as jarring with the role assigned to it by the narrative of a triumphant end to a dogged manhunt.

Fixing the meaning of the body in line with U.S. articulations would therefore depend upon accounts of the death itself. Reports of the raid detailed the various methods used by the Navy SEALs and the Obama administration to confirm to their satisfaction that bin Laden had been killed. These methods revolved around identifying bodily markers, and as residue of a covert operation, details of these methods gained significance as public evidence of what had occurred in secret. It turned out that the raid had been recorded by “[c]ameras mounted on the helmets of the American Navy SEALs” and relayed by satellite back to Washington in real-time. After bin Laden was shot, “one of the SEALs took a photograph of bin Laden's face and wired it to Washington, where facial recognition software gave a 95 per cent certainty that it was the al-Qaeda leader”. Both “DNA analysis” and “identifi[cation] by one of his wives, who survived the raid”, were described as “later confirm[ing] that they had their man” (Evans and Rayner, 2011).

This coverage confirmed that documentation of the raid existed, hinting at the possibility of a glimpse of this action. With the raid framed as an assertion of control over bin Laden's body, this documentation was represented as demonstrating the supreme importance of visualising bin Laden to control his meaning.

That confirmation of control, however, occurred not through the Obama administration's *display* of the mortally wounded body but its *secretion* of that body among military, executive and select Congressional figures. Control was signified through acknowledgement that bin Laden's corpse was now circulating only within these private political circles. Some of the most significant residue of the raid were therefore details of this secretion, which seemed to confirm that the U.S. now controlled the circulation of this body, defining the latter by U.S. control and preventing alternative readings. Instead of witnessing the covert operation, newsreaders witnessed the Obama administration's act of secretion: as headlines noted, it was the 'Obama team' that 'saw [the] drama unfold' (ibid), Obama who 'watched bin Laden die on live video' (Drury et al, 2011), although, as already noted, this turned out to be inaccurate. The witnessing of secretion was exemplified in the now-famous official photograph of the 'Obama team' apparently watching the raid unfold on an out-of-frame TV screen (Figure 10). With the gazes of those pictured turned towards the left frame of the photograph, and two people at the back craning their necks to look over others' shoulders, this representation focuses attention on that act of gazing. With the image explicitly framed as showing President Obama and his national security team overseeing the raid, these figures are represented as the ones now in control of bin Laden's visibility. As with lynching, secretion signifies that the authority to see and determine the meaning of the body rests with those who enacted and supported the violence.



Figure 10: The famous 'Situation Room photo' – the photograph was actually taken in an adjacent room (Crawford, 2012).

But while being framed as demonstrating the control of meaning through secretion, this photograph also intimates excess meaning. By figuring the absence being gazed at by the national security team as central to the image's importance – since the photo is meant to show the Obama team overseeing the raid – this residue highlights that this absence remains equivocal. Since whatever is being observed remains out of frame, witnesses to this residue are prompted to consider that it remains implicitly uncertain what this photograph reveals about the unseen operation, since the supposed key to this image's significance remains out of view and unknown. This residue consequently gains the kind of instability discussed in previous chapters, an instability over how exactly it relates to the unseen event. The juxtaposition between this absence and the gazes of the Obama team also produces a suspicion of state secrecy around what

exactly happened during the raid, despite the U.S. having acknowledged the operation. In the context of that suspicion of secrecy, this equivocal absence becomes suggestive and intimates that it remains unclear what exactly the secreted documentation of the raid, supposedly just outside the image's frame, does or does not prove about the raid. The photograph, in other words, implicitly represents the secretion of that documentation as problematic, as preventing clear public understanding. Even in this explicit visualisation of the U.S. gaze fixing bin Laden and controlling his visualisation, uncertainties about what took place undermine the meaning ascribed to that body by framing state secretion as only raising more questions.

Rationalising secretion

As a covert operation revealed by the state to the public, the Abbottabad raid distinguishes itself from other contemporary covert counter-terrorism which, when reported upon, normally passes without official acknowledgement. In the past, this acknowledgement would involve either an invocation from state officials for the public not to look at whatever was being glimpsed, or a refusal to confirm or deny and a mere justification of such action in general abstracted terms. The U.S.'s acknowledgement of the bin Laden raid did not represent a return to either of these modes of address, for these modes provided a rationale for the operation itself and for its having occurred outside of the public sphere. While the killing of bin Laden was certainly justified by the Obama administration quite explicitly, the rationale for secrecy that was provided pertained to the *hiding of residue*. The Obama administration did not seek to rationalise covertness so much as rationalise hiding the remainders of covert violence, specifically the corpse of Osama bin Laden. Press coverage interpreted this as an attempt to justify secretion in light of a competing U.S. desire to prove to the public that bin Laden had

indeed been killed. This interpretation positioned newsreaders as members of a public audience that would want to see such evidence, thus reiterating the importance of bin Laden's body to the meaning of the raid. As coverage continued, the state's rationale for secreting that body reverberated with other residue that was publicly available, rumours and contradictions surrounding what had happened, which produced intimations of that hidden body.

The secretion of bin Laden's body was explicitly framed by the physical mutilation that had resulted from his death. Coverage noted that "[t]he U.S. [that is, the Obama administration] has pictures of Bin Laden's body – reportedly with a bullet hole above an eye, and another to the heart – and video of both the raid on his bolthole in the Pakistani city of Abbottabad and his burial at sea" (Sears, 2011). This framing of secretion was promoted by President Obama himself in his own rationalisation of hiding bin Laden's body and his presumption that the question of making that body visible was one of providing evidence of bin Laden's death: "We don't trot out this stuff as trophies. We don't need to spike the football. We're absolutely certain that it is him... Certainly there's no doubt among Al Qaeda members that he is dead. You will not see Bin Laden walking on this earth again" (quoted in Tree and Sears, 2011). Obama's justification was interpreted as warning that visual evidence of bin Laden's body could be used as "an incitement to additional violence or as a propaganda tool" (Whittell, 2011), a reading backed up by White House spokesman Jay Carney: "These are graphic pictures of someone who was shot in the head and it's not in our national security interests to allow these images, as in the past has been the case, to become icons to rally opinion against the U.S." (quoted in Tree and Sears, 2011). The mutilated quality of bin Laden's corpse was emphasised by reports that the White House had decided not to release 'gruesome pictures' of 'Bin Laden's mangled corpse' (ibid) and by rumours that

his body had “a massive open wound across his eyes” leaving him “horribly disfigured” (Whittell, 2011), revealing “an empty eye socket and visible brain matter” (Greenhill and Sears, 2011).

These statements and rumours articulated the U.S. state's rationalisation of secretion in terms of the potentially provocative or inciting quality of bin Laden's physical mutilation, the potential for that mutilation to imply more than anything intended by the body's public release. This by itself does not prompt newsreaders to consider any such alternative meanings as having validity. These statements, however, were juxtaposed with the contradictory accounts of the raid itself, allowing for intimations that reframed the hiding of bin Laden's body. Having related this secretion to the fact that President Obama was being “urged to show the world proof that the terror chief had been killed – and put an end to the wild conspiracy theories”, coverage juxtaposed the “intense internal debate” over whether this proof should be revealed with the fact that the White House had “come under fire” for “retract[ing] key details” of the raid. These corrected details included the idea that bin Laden had “joined in the fight” against the Navy SEALs, that he had used a woman as a human shield and that his wife had been killed during the assault (Tree and Sears, 2011). Another article explicitly connected the issue of releasing photos to these qualified details, arguing that the “clamour” for proof of bin Laden's death had “been fuelled, it must be said, by the shifting accounts of what precisely happened in the compound” (Cornwell, 2011).

By detailing corrections to the official narrative, this coverage associated the hiding of bin Laden's body with repeated and contradictory state attempts to articulate bin Laden's intentions and behaviour and so control the meaning of the raid. Details of those repeated attempts produce a suspicion of ongoing state secrecy around what took place in the compound, a suspicion that frames both the rumours of bin Laden's

gruesome mutilation and the contradictions in the public record of the raid as suggestive public traces that might reveal things otherwise obscured by state secrecy. As a result, those details intimate the idea that the hiding of bin Laden's body is a state attempt to prevent further such incongruities in the public narrative of the raid. By highlighting that attempt at a control of meaning, this intimation undermines that attempt by prompting witnesses to consider the possibility that bin Laden's corpse might suggest different meanings and that this is why it is being kept hidden. The subject-position produced is one focused on bin Laden's secretion in terms of what it potentially and discomfotingly reveals about the unseen event.

President Obama's decision not to release visual documentation soon became the primary framing of the raid. *The Times*' cover story of 5 May, 'President bars use of bin Laden pictures', detailed "three categories of photographic evidence - pictures of the body taken in a hangar in Afghanistan before its transfer to the aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson; images of its disposal in a white shroud in the Arabian Sea; and pictures from the raid itself" (Whittell 2011). With this documentation's existence now reported, coverage turned to whether or not it should be publicly released. One *Express* article had two writers respectively weigh up the pros and cons of releasing images of bin Laden's corpse. Both sides implicitly connected the issue of proving bin Laden's death to establishing the meaning of the raid. Stating that "those who lived in terror of the man" need "proof" of his death, the first writer counters the argument that the photos are too "graphically horrifying" by pointing out that "Bin Laden himself forced the world to witness possibly the most dreadful images it has ever seen", those of the Twin Towers collapsing, and that "[a]ll of us, especially the families of the victims, need some form of catharsis. *Let us see with our own eyes* that the monster finally got what he deserved" (Blackburn, in Blackburn and Kelly, 2011, emphasis added). Visual proof is articulated

as that catharsis: demonstrating publicly that bin Laden is dead by using his corpse as evidence is represented as relating to the right to see. Whereas bin Laden once forced the presumed collective readership 'us' to view horrifying images, now 'we' can look at his body outwith the latter's control.

In arguing against releasing images, the second *Express* writer separates those wanting proof of death from the presumed readership: unlike the latter, those hankering for proof are “the nutcases” who offer “crackpot theories” with “dreary predictability” after official acknowledgement of the raid. The writer then suggests what reactions to this news implies about collective identity, with the “jokes doing the rounds about his demise” standing as “a robust testimony to how civilised countries deal with the death of the world's most wanted man and how we begin to put it into perspective” (Kelly, in Blackburn and Kelly, 2011). These statements frame responses to bin Laden's death as bearing on the identity of a collective readership: responding with humour instead of a desire to see the body is represented as a mark of 'civilised' sensibilities. Kelly similarly counters the idea that visualisation would re-establish some collective superiority: while “[s]ome argue that not publishing is a sign of the West being too soft and effete”, she argues, “the operation to patiently hunt down and dispatch Bin Laden surely showed the opposite: it was a quick, clean and precise illustration of a democracy exercising justice – especially for a superpower that has previously exhibited a tendency to carpet-bomb enemies back into the Stone Age” (ibid). An aversion to publishing is represented as cohering with, rather than curtailing, a demonstration of strength against terrorist enemies. The disagreement between the two writers is therefore not over the use of force, but over what counts as sufficient but justifiable catharsis through violence: the fact of a 'kill/capture' operation, or an additional disinterring of a corpse for public viewing.

This debate implicitly acknowledges the multiple potential meanings of bin Laden's body: Kelly's references to the 'previous tendencies' of the U.S. and to 'testimony' of a country as civilised point to the possibility of the U.S.'s actions being forwarded as evidence of something uncivilised. But more significantly, Kelly dismisses the argument that "because bullet-riddled corpses killed by Western troops in Afghanistan and Iraq are routinely paraded on Middle East TV channels it follows we should do the same" as "the age-old playground justification: "They did it first!"". Deciding whether or not to release photos requires "a rather more mature reflection". "By publishing", she writes, "*America runs the risk of being seen as dancing on Bin Laden's grave, a ghoulish glorification of the sort associated with the hysterical zealots who follow their fallen idol's cause*" (ibid, emphasis added). These statements characterise a vengeful gazing at mutilation as unbecoming a civilised collective. But in the conspicuous absence of bin Laden's body from the public sphere, these comments make that absence ambiguous: it is unclear whether the problem with publishing stems from the vengeful 'They did it first' attitude or from the act of *making the body visible*, due to how that body might be read by others. Hiding the body is implicitly represented as protecting against a negative public appraisal. With these comments represented as reporting on a covert operation, this ambiguity over the purpose of hiding bin Laden's body is framed as significant. It intimates the possibility that secreting the body merely obscures the implications of bin Laden's killing for a collective 'civilised' identity, and that the first writer Blackburn's demand for catharsis through visualisation risks revealing those implications. Explicit worries about the U.S.'s public image are reshaped and produce a subject-position focused on those worries' implications: perhaps they speak to a real but secreted incoherence in a 'civilised' identity.

These allusions to bin Laden's secretion as precarious discursive labour became

more pronounced as coverage continued. One *Times* editorial argued for releasing photographic evidence with explicit reference to “the iconography of power” – that with the ‘War on Terror’ having been inaugurated with “televised images of two planes crashing into the World Trade Centre”, the U.S. now had the ability to “close the circle” and “end... an often savage decade haunted by 9/11” by releasing these photographs (Boyes, 2011). These articulations represent the visualisation of bin Laden's bodily markers, a demonstration of control over their public circulation, as winning and ending the War on Terror. Yet the article also acknowledges that those who are against releasing any photographs are concerned that “triumphalism is in itself provocative and a betrayal of US standards of civilisation”. Boyes argues that this “misses the point”: showing the violated body transmits a “basic brutal message”, that bin Laden has been “shr[unk]” by the U.S. from being “a personification of the jihad” to mere “human status”. One needs a “cruel and tasteless” public photograph to “[convince]” people “that power ha[s] irrevocably changed hands” (ibid).

In making this argument, the article suggests the instrumental use of mutilated bodies without answering the charge explicitly raised that such a public display of brutality would undermine civilised precepts. The article simply notes that “[i]f the US Administration fails to do this, the pictures will leak out anyway” (ibid). By making this appeal, the article represents the release of photographs as important not in proving bin Laden's death, but in controlling the meaning of these pictures *by releasing them oneself* and framing their meaning therein. Framed as being part of the public record of a covert event, the absence of an answer to the charge of betraying civilised values becomes significant, intimating that the secretion of brutal and tasteless images thus far is an attempt to foreclose such charges being applied to the operation itself. Intimating this attempt at controlling the meaning of the raid implicitly reduces its efficacy; while

Boyes claims withholding the images implies that “the US is somehow afraid of the consequences of its action”, this allusion to the reason for secretion shapes a subject-position focused precisely on such a fear.

The argument that photos would probably be leaked played a wider role in shaping intimations of bin Laden's violated body. One commentary in fact made the case for *not* releasing the photos on the likelihood of their eventually coming out anyway, saying “[i]t's not about censorship. It's about ownership. Today Mr Obama doesn't want to be the US president who blithely throws out a photograph of his country's greatest enemy with an extra hole in his head... He understands [just] how incredibly unattractive this makes [the U.S.] seem to the rest of the world” (Rifkind, 2011). Yet the same article also argues in favour of looking at any photo that is released, since “you must accept there is a degree of moral hypocrisy in simultaneously being glad, but not wanting not to know what that looks like... This is the dark side of our nice safe world. Either you condemn it or you own it” (ibid). Contradictory positions on 'ownership' aside, the idea that bin Laden's body might make the U.S. appear 'unattractive' frames the absence of that body as equivocal: it perhaps reflects genuine moral concern, or public relations worries, or both. As part of commentary on an act of violence that has otherwise been kept hidden, this ambiguity alludes to bin Laden's body as having multiple potential meanings which may explain its secretion.

Intimations of bin Laden's body finally prompted witnesses to consider why witnessing bin Laden's corpse would be desirable. These allusions emerged in reports of fake photographs of bin Laden's body, which had been circulating online and were in fact used by major newspapers on their front pages before their were outed as spuriousness (Hill, 2011). Subsequently publishing these photographs while acknowledging their falsity, as at least one paper did on its website (Tree and Sears,

2011), implicitly characterised viewing that corpse as desired by the public, particularly when the photos appeared in articles discussing Obama's decision not to make any real images available. The emphasis in these fake photographs on the mutilation of bin Laden's body, however, contrasted the Obama administration's justifications for keeping the body hidden, since the latter rested precisely on that mutilation. These fake photographs are striking in their verisimilitude: it is difficult to establish from the photos alone that the wounding shown on bin Laden's body is a computer manipulation. The statement that they are fake therefore paradoxically highlights their apparent 'realness'. As residue, albeit purposefully misleading residue, of a covert raid, these visualisations of an absent body allude to the idea that simply witnessing the *kind* of mutilation bin Laden would have been exposed to is not enough, that verisimilitude is inadequate. This intimation reframes the explicit articulation of a public desire to see such images by rendering unclear why such desire would exist. Witnesses are invited to adopt a subject-position that is uncertain what kind of collective witnessing is being asked for on their behalf. The narrative of U.S. triumphalism is thus undermined by a focus on unanswered questions as to what the real absent body of bin Laden might reveal. In none of these subject-positions, however, is the violence itself given ethical consideration; it is implicitly represented as important only in terms of how secrecy might be obscuring its implications for a collective identity.

Living and dying in the Waziristan Mansion

As coverage of the raid developed in the days after it was revealed, further residue was turned up that went beyond rumours as to what took place. Some of this residue took the form of proxies for bin Laden's secreted body, traces of his activities in the period leading up to the Navy SEALs' assault. In officially releasing such traces, U.S.

government and military officials articulated what this residue revealed about the nature of bin Laden. Absent the al Qaeda leader's body, however, these traces stood as some of the most suggestive public evidence of the unseen covert event and the body's place within it; aspects of these traces went unremarked by the state or were explained in suggestive ways. These ambiguities and contradictions in the representation of these traces had the potential to allude to bin Laden's secreted body in ways that undermined official explanations.

On May 5 it was revealed that bin Laden had 500 Euros in cash and two telephone numbers sewn into his clothes when he was killed, moves interpreted as indicating he was prepared to make a quick escape from his compound if needed. This residue of the covert action, in the form of snippets as to what was found on bin Laden's body, was translated in press accounts as markers of bin Laden's intentions and state of mind, evocative insights into his personality and thus indicators of the significance of the raid. The image of his keeping hold of foreign money and phone numbers was seen to indicate "[his] confidence" that "he'd get a headsup" about any impending U.S. strike on his home (Gardham, 2011), as well as his nervousness, that "[he] would would flee if there was any hint the CIA were closing in" (Fricker, 2011). These explanations of residue found on his body appear in the context of stories about bin Laden having been killed by just such a U.S. strike, and as a result represent bin Laden as overconfident, his anxious preparation ultimately useless in the face of U.S. military superiority. The failure of bin Laden's planning opposite U.S. capabilities did not go unnoticed: 'He was killed in his getaway kit', stated one headline (ibid).

Yet these explanations do not delimit the significations made by these items. In arguing that these items indicated bin Laden's anxious overconfidence that he could escape any attempted raid, coverage acknowledged that these items therefore suggested

bin Laden had a support network, a collection of “shadowy aides on 24-hour stand-by”, capable of “whisk[ing] him from his secret lair to a faraway mountain hideout”. As such, “US spooks [were] now desperately trying to get leads from their phone numbers, which are registered to Pakistani networks” (ibid). One *Times* piece even interpreted these items as indicative of bin Laden's “belie[f] that he was under the protection of the state”, suggesting Pakistani government or military complicity in his hiding (Philp, 2011). With these items implicitly framed as public traces of a covert operation, an event whose covertness had ensured it would pass unseen, the ambiguity of these items in relation to bin Laden's support network becomes suggestive public evidence. Framed by covertness, this residue's ambiguity hints at bin Laden's absent body as possibly not indicating a clear victory against al Qaeda, but as providing an opaque glimpse of a wider network that remains unvanquished.

This allusion is unlikely to have significantly reshaped the more explicit meaning given to the raid, since the possibility of a continuing threat does not necessarily subvert the role assigned to bin Laden's body by U.S. narratives. More significant, however, was the acknowledgement that bin Laden's intentions with these items remained unclear: “some insiders admitted they were baffled why the al-Qaeda head was carrying Euros when US dollars and Pakistan rupees are more accepted in the region” (Wheeler and Samson, 2011). Having been explicitly articulated as proxy markers of bin Laden's identity, these sewn items were able to intimate other possibilities regarding that identity, since they could not be fully accounted for by explicit explanations. Bin Laden's body was thus implicitly represented as remaining somewhat inscrutable, possibly even to state officials, alluding to the idea that his death might not fit a story of the U.S. defeating a nervous and overconfident terrorist. That these traces appeared on bin Laden's body therefore shaped a subject-position only

more aware of how hiding that body was an attempt to delimit his meaning. As with lynching discourse, that meaning is undermined once this discursive labour is revealed.

While this residue received some press attention, more prominent proxies for the absent body was footage of bin Laden taken while he was living in his compound, discovered among his belongings and released by the Obama administration a few days after the raid. These 'home videos' included a recording of bin Laden making a speech entitled 'Message to the American people', a recording of him apparently fluffing one of his lines while recording a similar speech and having to start again, and footage of him sitting on the floor in his compound watching television (N. Owens, 2011b; Figure 11). Descriptions of the footage's discovery figured it as demonstrating bin Laden's inability to further control the public circulation of his image; releasing this footage was interpreted as indicating the U.S. state's control over bin Laden's body. That control was represented through descriptions of this “most revealing” of footage as “show[ing] a bin Laden that was clearly never meant to be seen outside his inner circle” (Sherwell et al, 2011) – the implication being that this intention was now moot.



Figure 11: Still from video footage found at Osama bin Laden's Abbottabad compound (N. Owens, 2011b).

Having been articulated as indicating U.S. control, the footage was charged with revealing bin Laden's identity as hypocritical. The released videos “show[ed] the difference between the public image of Bin Laden and the man he was when the cameras were turned off”, according to a Pentagon spokesman (quoted in C. Graham, 2011), again highlighting bin Laden's loss of control over his image. Releasing these videos was said to have ‘shatter[ed] a carefully cultivated image’ (Nelson and Crilly, 2011). Bin Laden was characterised on the basis of this footage as vain and self-absorbed, with articles noting how his “shabby grey beard” in one video contrasted with an apparently dyed and trimmed beard in another where he was filming a piece of propaganda (ibid). The seeming focus on his own image was also read from a recording of him watching older footage of himself on TV, “consumed by his own vanity” (N.

Owens, 2011a). This video showed a “vain recluse, as much obsessed with his own image in the global media as with waging jihad” (Nelson and Crilly, 2011), again magnifying the sense that releasing these tapes marked bin Laden's failure to control that image any longer. As well as revealing his hypocrisy, this residue of the raid was also figured as humiliating the now-dead al Qaeda leader by revealing the phony nature of his staged persona. The footage showed a “frail”, “distinctly old and jaded” man akin to “a pensioner sitting out a cold winter while watching daytime television” (ibid), an “elderly grandfather with a cap on his head and blanket around his shoulders”, at a far remove from “the gun-toting rebel or the scholarly sheikh dictating messages to the outside world” (Harris, 2011).

These interpretations of the found footage frame the body of bin Laden as reflecting the hypocritical and effeminate nature of Islamic fundamentalism. Positioned as a prominent figure within al Qaeda, bin Laden's body and behaviour are then articulated as revealing the 'vain recluse' behind the 'jihad-waging rebel'. A particular configuration of race and gender is read from this footage of bin Laden's body, constructing a hierarchy between this humiliated identity and the identity of the presumed collective readership. This footage, however, does not provide a glimpse of the body's present condition, which has been explicitly secreted by the state. These videos circulated alongside a very public acknowledgement that the body they documented was currently being kept hidden. As such, these images could implicitly refer to that secretion. These references derived from an ambiguity in explanations of the images: the footage was positioned in press coverage as evidence both of bin Laden's hypocritical vanity *and* of his symbolic dangerousness as a leading member of al Qaeda. The image of an old, weak man living “a life of claustrophobic domesticity” mirroring a dull retirement (Randall and Buncombe, 2011) implicitly jars with the characterisation

of this footage by intelligence officials as showing someone “still active in al-Qaida on both a strategic and tactical level” (Harris, 2011). The mundane scene documented in this video emphasises the footage's uneventfulness, its presumed dissimilarity from a violent raid against an ostensibly dangerous terrorist leader. This uneventfulness signifies that the residue is arbitrary, that these traces have an equivocal relation to the event itself. One *Observer* piece tackles this ambiguity head-on, asking: “what are these clips supposed to tell us?” (Beaumont, 2011).

The instability of these images in terms of their meaning was made suggestive once those images were framed as residue of a covert action, as public traces of an event that the state had kept secret from the public. These images circulated within the public debate that was by now unfolding over whether images of bin Laden's corpse should be revealed. Newspapers acknowledged that these home videotapes appeared to have been “released by US intelligence officials in an effort to scotch conspiracy theories that the al Qaeda leader had not in fact been located and killed” (Nelson and Grilly, 2011) – conspiracy theories understood as a response to the absence of bodily evidence for that killing. This debate over making the secreted corpse public therefore juxtaposed public traces of video footage that rendered ambiguous the danger posed by bin Laden in life. The historical affiliation with lynching suggests that this ambiguity could undermine the explicit meaning ascribed the violated body. In this case, such a dynamic occurs implicitly: the juxtaposition between debate and images allowed the latter to intimate the unverifiable idea that the secreted body might actually undermine the U.S. state narrative of bin Laden's centrality to al Qaeda, and therefore the triumphalist reading of the raid. This intimation therefore represents the secretion of that body as an attempt to *avoid* precisely the kind of ambiguity of meaning that is hinted at by the released footage. Precisely because that footage was released in the context of a debate over

secrection, it raised the implicit question of what that body might reveal which its secrection would be curtailing.

Having taken place unseen but its location later identified by journalists, the raid on the compound itself afforded further residue that extended beyond those traces officially released by the U.S. state. Comprising a number of buildings and a plot of land, the compound remained largely intact, while the town of Abbottabad contained further traces in the form of rumours and speculation circulating among the town's residents. The Waziristan Mansion – so-called locally in reference to the mountainous region on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border that its residents were rumoured to have come from (D. Williams et al, 2011) – quickly became a prominent part of coverage of the raid, as did Abbottabad. Coverage of the compound's location included both speculation over the significance of that location and rumours regarding the compound's residents; both had the potential to shape the represented meaning of the covert event.

Articles were quick to highlight the contrast between the dominant past suspicions of bin Laden's location and where he had actually been hiding. Bin Laden himself was characterised as having “expected to go down in a blaze of glory in the mountains of Afghanistan or a remote hideout in Pakistan's tribal areas”, but instead he “met his end in a short firefight in Pakistan's answer to Aldershot” (Oborne, 2011a). Not only did this represent bin Laden as having been unable to determine how he died, but his death was framed as reflecting his hypocrisy, having revealed that his public image of rugged insurgent masked cowardice: “[t]he sprawling million-dollar hideaway” was “a far cry from the dank caves that Bin Laden's acolytes were led to believe he was skulking in” (Parker, 2011). Yet the location of the unseen raid had the potential to intimate things beyond mere hypocrisy. References to bin Laden's comfortable existence acknowledged that his compound lay just a few hundred feet from 'Pakistan's

Sandhurst', the Pakistan Military Academy (Chapman, 2011), a fact that was portrayed as raising incredulity that Pakistani authorities could not have known of his presence. With this location and its possible implication of Pakistani collusion framed as a trace of covert action, the implication was able to allude to bin Laden's body, and its location, as rendering U.S. triumphalism premature. Such a subject-position, however, could still have been accommodated within a U.S. narrative of the raid, since Pakistani collusion need not have undercut calls for renewed vigilance in the aftermath of bin Laden's death.

More significant were the rumours of bin Laden's late life in Abbottabad, relayed by neighbours and other residents. These rumours were drawn on by press coverage to tell a story of the raid's spectacular and surprising quality, that it should have taken place where it did, by contrasting the unprepossessing quality of the town with its most famous recently-deceased resident. Bin Laden, in the words of one *Times* article, "was cut down by American bullets among the cantonment barracks, elegant lawns, cricket fields, Christian churches, fish-and-chip shops and music schools of the country's social elite" (Loyd, 2011). As well as drawing on this image of the town to indicate bin Laden's hypocrisy over 'waging jihad' in such surroundings, coverage used this contrast to characterise him as an ill-fitting resident, one whose terroristic qualities made him stand out. Thus in headlines bin Laden became the 'Neighbour from hell' (A. Gregory, 2011), 'The Khans next door' with 'the darkest secret' (Oborne, 2011b), 'the terror godfather next door' (D. Williams et al, 2011) – characterisations that played on a supposed incongruity between bin Laden's inner disposition, as a dark and hellish person of terror, and his attempt to hide in a normal town as a normal neighbour. These articles pointed to the testimony of Abbottabad residents to justify descriptions of bin Laden as a "[t]error mastermind" whose behaviour caused neighbours to "[grow]

suspicious”, for instance his banning nearby children from retrieving their cricket ball from his garden (A. Gregory, 2011).

The accounts of neighbours, however, did not quite fit this image of a hellish household whose actions provoked suspicion. Instead, neighbours characterised bin Laden as somewhat inscrutable in his life in Abbottabad. Residents of the compound who visited nearby shops “seemed pretty polite and decent... They were nice guys”. Moreover, “[i]t was never very clear” where the residents had arrived from six years earlier. No-one ever saw bin Laden in those subsequent years; in fact, “[n]o one suspected anything probably because they didn't interact much”. Far from suspicion, neighbours most frequently expressed disbelief: “It just doesn't make sense. Abbottabad was the most peaceful city of Pakistan” (ibid). Nor were residents apparently provoked by the construction of the compound: while articles articulated its security as extraordinary – noting its 18 foot walls, security cameras, barbed wire and lack of phone or internet connection – “[f]ar from being a highly impenetrable site” for residents, “children were invited into [the] compound to play with pet rabbits and [bin Laden's] offspring even attended the local school”. These statements contradict the idea that the compound would have inevitably revealed the presence of a terrorist mastermind; as one resident put it, “[o]nly when I found out that Osama Bin Laden had been killed in their house did I make the connection” (Flanagan 2011).

As part of the public record of this covert event in its aftermath, these statements produce excess meaning. While coverage sometimes explained residents' lack of suspicion as evidence of a town in denial (Loyd, 2011), the contradiction between residents' statements and the narrative of 'growing suspicions' caused by an 'extraordinary' compound alludes to bin Laden as remaining as inscrutable in death as he apparently was in life. The uncertainty produced by residents' accounts intimates the

idea that bin Laden's body continues to elude attempts to fix its meaning as representing inevitable detection and defeat. This continued to the end of the the week's coverage of the raid, by which point the circumstances of bin Laden's "entirely secret life" in the compound were still up in the air and "the subject of conflicting reports", for instance regarding his operational role within al Qaeda. All that was known were seemingly innocuous details of the compound – that it had "a cow, a large vegetable patch, and the children kept rabbits" (Randall and Buncombe, 2011) – details which emphasised the conspicuous absence of other more certain information about bin Laden's late life.

Scars of the raid

As already discussed, the significance of the Abbottabad raid is that unlike most contemporary covert counter-terrorism, this operation's secrecy was addressed by the state to the public, through an official acknowledgement that documentation of both the raid and the body at its centre was being kept hidden. This acknowledgement was accompanied by a state rationale, not for the operation's covertness, but for secretion in its aftermath. The residue discussed so far constituted traces of the raid that the U.S. state acknowledged, addressed, and sometimes even propagated: from sparse details of how bin Laden was killed to home video footage retrieved from the compound. The resident testimonies, however, speak to a different category of residue: traces that were *not* addressed by the state but which existed outside of U.S. and Pakistani officials' accounts of what took place. When reported upon, these other traces of the raid had the potential to reshape how the secretion of bin Laden's body, and possible wider secrecy, was represented to witnesses confronted with all of this residue. As in the case of lynching discourse, the representation of secrecy as a way to contain the excess meaning of the violated body could undermine its own representational power.

Much of the initial coverage of the raid was given over to Sohaib Athar, an Abbottabad resident who inadvertently recorded details of the raid on Twitter as it occurred nearby. He began by noting the sound of a helicopter flying over the town that night, followed by the sound of explosions, expressing uncertainty himself as to what was going on (Figure 12). Given their news representation as an inadvertent act of witnessing, these tweets signify the raid's covertness, with details gained through accidental resident testimonies that cannot establish what exactly they reveal. Press coverage furthered this emphasis by framing Athar's witnessing as his “tweet[ing] *live to the world* about US special forces storming Osama Bin Laden's lair” (Sabey, 2011, emphasis added), implying that the tweets captured an operation that was supposed to be hidden. Indeed, Athar's messages were re-tweeted thousands of times by other Twitter users. Yet these tweets' content is also significant. Athar argued with friends online that the helicopter was “too noisy to be a spy craft” and that one of the aircraft had been shot down (quoted in Ward, 2011). After hearing a “huge window-shaking bang”, he tweeted: “Since Taliban (probably) don't have helicopters, and since they're saying it was not “ours”, so must be a complicated situation”. As for the downed helicopter: “People are saying it was not a technical fault and it was shot down. I heard it CIRCLE 3-4 times above, sounded purposeful” (quoted in Arthur and Hill, 2011).

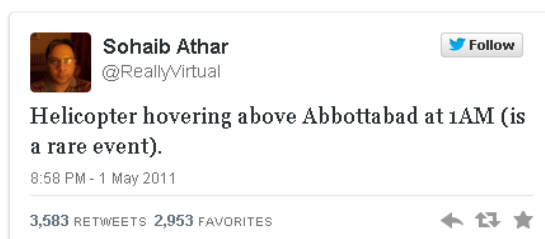


Figure 12: The first of Sohaib Athar's tweets on the night of the bin Laden raid (Athar, 2011).

These tweets are speculations as to the actions of the Navy SEALs in carrying out the raid. Athar questions what kind of aircraft are being used and thus what their purpose might be, highlights the issue of who is operating the aircraft in Pakistani airspace, discusses how the helicopter crashed, and proffers the movement of the aircraft as an important indicator of what was going on. Unlike the articulations of U.S. state and military officials, which positioned bin Laden and the end of his own control over his own body as the significance of the raid, these tweets located that significance in the actions of the Navy SEALs. Athar's tweets are framed as part of public traces of an otherwise-covert event, becoming suggestive as a result. The uncertainties expressed in these tweets consequently allude to the actions of the absent Navy SEALs as open to question and as possibly incoherent given the noise of the 'covert' aircraft and the crashing of a helicopter. These intimations reframe the raid as unclear in terms of what it says about the intentions and efficacy of the SEALs' strategy. These allusions are unverifiable but remain discursively suggestive in the context of the apparent secrecy of the operation. Given that these tweets were reported in the context of the acknowledged hiding of bin Laden's body, and appeared alongside images of the helicopter wreckage being cordoned off and towed away by Pakistani soldiers (Figure 13), these allusions represent the apparently broad secrecy surrounding the raid as a precarious attempt to prevent ambiguities in the narrative of what happened. By highlighting this discursive labour, these intimations undermine the state's efforts by hinting at aspects of the SEALs' actions that secrecy might be covering up.



Figure 13: Wreckage of the crashed Navy SEALs helicopter at Abbottabad (Drury et al, 2011).

Similar intimations were produced across much of the press coverage beyond Athar's tweets. Further eyewitness testimony alluded to the SEALs' actions as inscrutable. One resident was quoted as having seen "two black gunship helicopters... I couldn't see them clearly in the night, but it was obvious that they weren't Pakistani". "The buzzing overhead" lasted some five or six minutes, before residents heard "a loud explosion": "'We rushed out of the house immediately,'" says Muhammad Riaz, echoing the words of several residents across Abbottabad who hastened out on to the streets in panic. "When we came outside, I saw the helicopter on fire, there was smoke rising out of it" (Waraich, 2011). With these snatched glimpses producing a suspicion of overall secrecy, these eyewitness accounts represent the SEALs' manoeuvres as opaque through distanced views of unclear aircraft, odd sounds and fire and smoke left in its wake. Residents were described as having been "woken by shattering explosions" and hearing "[b]ursts of gunfire" until "[a] little later, the silhouettes of three helicopters could be seen rising and disappearing into the dark sky" (Sengupta, 2011). Framed as suggestive

public traces of a covert event, these sparse details emphasise the inability to establish the SEALs' actions from them, alluding to those actions as being possibly more confused and haphazard than officially suggested. This intimation remains equivocal, however, as these traces prompt newsreaders to adopt the perspective of residents for whom the operation is too ephemeral, “over in less than an hour”, after which “all they could see was thick dark smoke coming from the compound” (Hussain, 2011).

Precisely because of their seeming opacity, these traces were able to intimate the SEALs' actions and intent in ways that implicitly reshaped representations of the raid. One *Reuters* image taken from mobile phone footage on 2 May and reprinted in newspapers was purported to show “the compound in flames” soon after the Navy SEALs attacked (Walsh, 2011a; Figure 14). Yet this residue signified in excess of what was being asked of it by this coverage. Framed as public evidence of an event that was conducted in secret, the image becomes significant in its inscrutability: its composition of pitch black and large amorphous balls of light surrounded by smoke can represent the SEALs' covert actions only opaquely, since there is no indication in the image or surrounding text of what exactly is being shown here. Being linked by press coverage to the raid, the image implicitly provokes questions: what are the SEALs doing in this image? Are the balls of light explosions? Is this documentation of the raid being enacted or a later image? This representation of the raid discursively stutters, that is, it emphasises its instability in terms of what it shows about the unseen event, in particular whether it is an eventful image of the raid's unfolding or an uneventful one of its aftermath. When contextualised as a public trace of actions that were covert, this stuttering alludes to the absent bodies and technology of the Navy SEALs as possibly being able to shed light on what is visualised in this non-state glimpse. This intimation implicitly represents the likely secretion of those bodies and technology as a possible

attempt to prevent understanding of some of the residue left behind. The subject-position produced is focused on the possible extent and purpose of secrecy.



Figure 14: Still from mobile phone footage of the Abbottabad compound taken on the night of the raid (Walsh, 2011a).

Other reports of the raid's aftermath documented suggestive traces of the SEALs' actions. Articles pointed to “[d]ramatic evidence of the strike” with “[t]he 18-foot perimeter walls... pockmarked with bullet holes” (A. Gregory, 2011), “scars of Sunday's sensational raid” (Parker, 2011). Yet other coverage asserted that “[t]here were practically no signs of a fight” at the compound – “No bullet holes punctuated the walls” (Osborne, 2011a). Other journalists noted children's bikes, cooking pots and broken clocks “scattered around [bin Laden's] deserted compound” (A. Gregory, 2011), with one clock “stuck at 2.20am – when the elite US Navy SEALs struck”, while just as significantly there lay “a twisted tangle of scorched metal” from the U.S. helicopter blown up by the SEALs after it crash-landed (Parker, 2011). These traces of the raid point to the actions of the Navy SEALs while emphasising their dissimilarity with those

actions – the possible bulletholes and helicopter wreckage do not provide a glimpse of those action but instead signify the absence of any such documentation. The stopped clock similarly defines those actions as distanced from newsreaders, who cannot see what happened at that frozen point in time. Once again, a suspicion of wider secrecy around the SEALs' actions is implicitly signified by apparent traces of unseen events; once framed by this secrecy, those traces allude to the absent special forces agents' actions and intentions as holding the key to this residue's unclear meaning but as having been secreted. In the context of the U.S.'s acknowledged secretion of documentation, this intimation prompts witnesses to consider whether such secretion is as an attempt to prevent any contesting of the state's narrative of the raid. While this shapes a subject-position of suspicion towards that narrative, it also positions newsreaders alongside “[l]ocal children... rummaging through the fields, picking up pieces of the wreckage with a view to selling them on” (Osborne, 2011a). The prompted focus, therefore, is on the difficulty in ascertaining what this wreckage might reveal about the raid.

The residue uncovered at the compound also alluded to Osama bin Laden's absent body. Articles referenced footage broadcast on Pakistani television that showed “a bloodstained carpet at the foot of a dishevelled bed” with “[p]illows... strewn over the mattress and other furniture... overturned” (Haynes, 2011). “Other rooms had been ransacked, with clothes scattered on the floor. A cot lay smashed in one of the seven bedrooms. The walls were riddled with bullet marks” (Hussain, 2011). These details act as evocative traces of the violence committed against those living in the compound, hinting at the actions the led to overturned furniture and spatters of blood. Yet when juxtaposed with discussion of bin Laden's body being kept hidden by the Obama administration, these traces invite readers to focus on the absence of that body from public representations. Stills from the Pakistani footage were reprinted within a number

of articles as the few visualisations of the interior of the compound (Drury et al, 2011; Figure 15). As ostensible evidence of the death of bin Laden, the stills emphasise the lack of his body by showing only an empty room and pointing at the blood covering the carpet. As traces of an implicitly covert operation, these stills intimate his body as having been removed from these scenes and thus as having left them undefined as to what they reveal about the raid. The hiding of bin Laden's body is implicitly represented as obscuring what did or did not take place, intimating the possibility that this was the state's intention. At the same time, the opacity of these traces prompts a focus on the difficulty in understanding what they indicate about what took place. Comprehending opaque residue becomes the implicit significance of the unseen event.



Figure 15: Still from video taken in Osama bin Laden's bedroom in the Abbottabad raid's aftermath (Drury et al, 2011).

Conclusion: the dilemmas of hiding

The raid on bin Laden's Abbottabad compound stands out from the vast majority of

contemporary covert counter-terrorism in that it was officially acknowledged by its state perpetrator. U.S. officials revealed that the raid had taken place and gave some details of what had happened. The Navy SEALs operation did not, however, designate a throwback to past portrayals of covert action. The U.S. did not provide iconic glimpses of the raid being enacted; aside from the fragmented testimony of Abbottabad residents and elliptical images, such glimpses were entirely absent. There were no glimpses of the bodies of those involved – only of those Obama administration officials who (partially) witnessed the raid themselves. And when the U.S. did acknowledge the raid, it did not articulate a rationale for the covertness of the operation; that covertness remained mostly implicit in the fact that the event had occurred out of public view before being officially linked to the United States. Instead of invoking covertness, U.S. officials admitted to, and attempted to justify, secreting residue of the operation in its aftermath: specifically, documentation of the raid taken by the SEALs, and the body of the man at its centre.

It is the hiding of this body, more than the triumphalist statements from President Obama and others, that is most significant in shaping the representational dynamics of the raid in public discourse. Hiding the body narrowed the possibility that its surface markers might be represented in ways that went against the framing provided by the Obama administration, for the simple reason that those markers were not publicly-available to be scrutinised and re-contextualised. This is a more compelling basis for an historical parallel between covert counter-terrorism and lynching than discussed by critical scholarship: for in both cases, the representation of violence is shaped by the *hiding* of the violated body, with that secretion signifying who has the right to look and determine the meaning of the violence while curtailing the explicit articulation of alternative meanings.

As this chapter's discussion of lynching pointed out, however, this representational power of secretion relies on unsubstantiated rumours and speculation representing the violence in ways that cannot be contested without access to the central proof of the act of violence. Were that bodily proof to be found, as in the case of Emmett Till, or other traces unearthed, they might cast the act of hiding in a different light. If that act were admitted to, moreover, it may lose its representational power by producing public details that could then be scrutinised and contested. This possibility, as suggested by this historical affiliation, was used to orient analysis of coverage of the Abbottabad raid. While Osama bin Laden's body was never publicly revealed, the Obama administration did confirm that secretion and articulate a rationale for it. Having been officially acknowledged, this act lost the representational power associated with lynching not only because it could be traced to a particular group of individuals, but because it was justified *to* the public rather than left unspoken to signify defiance towards that public.

The state's admittance and rationalisation of secretion therefore circulated in the public sphere alongside other residue of the raid, residue whose ambiguities and contradictions were highlighted by their framing as public evidence of an event that had seemingly been conducted covertly. The U.S. released various details of the manhunt for bin Laden, the raid itself and what had been discovered at the Abbottabad compound. While framing this residue as detailing a U.S. victory over a cowardly, anxious and hypocritical representative of terrorist barbarity, however, news accounts referenced aspects of this residue that did not appear to fit into the U.S. narrative of the raid. When framed as public traces of a covert event, these uncertainties alluded to bin Laden's absent body as possibly not fitting into the role assigned to it by this narrative, implicitly representing the body's secretion as an attempt to cover up any incongruities in the

story of what had taken place. Meanwhile, other residue was uncovered by journalists and went unacknowledged by the state. These traces pointed to the actions of the Navy SEALs themselves while leaving those actions opaque. As further public evidence of a covert event, these traces alluded to the possibility that those actions too did not quite fit the narrative being officially offered about what had happened. The secretion of the SEALs' operation, of documentation of their actions, was implicitly represented as preventing public understanding of this visible residue. Finally, the public debate that ensued once it was revealed that bin Laden's body was to be kept hidden hinted at unspoken possibilities about what that secretion might say about a collective identity of supposedly civilised counter-terrorist states.

These intimations of bin Laden's absent body, and the bodies and actions of the Navy SEALs, implicitly represented the hiding of that body as a precarious attempt to control the meaning of the raid, to prevent any interpretation of the event that would contradict the U.S. state narrative. While such an attempt at control is intuitively obvious, its implicit highlighting by allusions to possibilities that went *beyond* the U.S. narrative framed that attempt as contestable and as worthy of scrutiny, undermining the meaning ascribed by that narrative. Intimations of unverifiable ideas about the raid, and hints that secrecy was being used to curtail those ideas, implicitly shaped a subject-position of doubt towards the public stories being offered by suggesting that different public traces rubbed against those stories and hinted at alternatives. The secrecy around bin Laden's body, and the possibility of secrecy stretching beyond that body, was implicitly represented as preventing public understanding.

Placed in an historical affiliation with representations of lynching practice, press coverage of the Abbottabad raid does not appear to have prompted newsreaders to assent to the covert violence that had passed unseen. The hegemony of the state's

triumphalist reading of its own violence was far from guaranteed. The representational dynamics produced by the combination of admitted secrecy and public residue instead prompted witnesses to recognise and scrutinise the discursive labour represented by the state's control of bodies' visibility. From this subject-position, the meaning attached to bin Laden's death by the Obama administration appeared precariously reliant on hiding documentation of the raid. Because the secreted bodies and actions of those involved were intimated as possibly undoing the U.S. narrative of the raid, these intimations prompted witnesses of this residue to consider the troubling implications of that undoing for the claimed technically and ethically superior counter-terrorist collective identity, in opposition to a supposedly dangerous, arrogant and hypocritical terrorist outfit.

These intimations did not, however, shape a subject-position of dissent towards the covert violence committed in Abbottabad. The clear difference with the contesting of meaning in the case of lynching practice was that no attempt was made to cast bin Laden as the victim of racialised supremacist violence, as anti-lynching activists did for lynch victims by framing their mortally wounded bodies as evidence of the barbarity underpinning claims of white civilised superiority (Rushdy, 2012: 66-70). Instead, the implicit representation of bin Laden's secretion as an attempt to control the meaning of the raid and his body played into the representational dynamic identified in the previous chapter. Allusions to what the absent documentation of bin Laden and the Navy SEALs might reveal about the raid prompted witnesses to focus their attention on how secrecy was preventing public understanding. The subject-position that this constitutes is self-absorbed and insular, concerned with how absent bodies and documents might bear on the meaning of the raid and therefore on the collective identities implicated in it, and how any such implications were possibly being obscured

through the use of state secrecy. The inability of witnesses to comprehend the visible residue of the raid, and the possibility that secrets being kept from witnesses by the state are perpetuating this incomprehension, becomes the perceived significance of the raid. Absent violated bodies are important not in terms of any ethical bearing of that violence in itself, but in terms of how their absence might be rendering the raid opaque. The ethical orientation towards the use of force in this case is once again sharply delimited.

Chapter 5

Landscapes of rumour in Sahara-Sahel kidnappings

On 15 June 2015, British and U.S. news media reported that a U.S. air strike on the eastern Libyan city of Ajdabiya had killed a leading al Qaeda-affiliated militant.

Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a veteran of both conflict in Afghanistan and the Algerian civil war of the 1990s, had “earned a reputation as one of the most elusive jihadi leaders in the region”, having been “reported killed several times” yet remaining at large, to the point that he had been “nicknamed “Uncatchable” by French forces”. His reputation stemmed from his being “long a major figure in Saharan smuggling, hostage-taking, arms trafficking and insurgencies, including the conflict in Mali” that had culminated in a French intervention two years before. His killing would therefore constitute “a major strike against al-Qaida allied operations in the region” – “[i]f confirmed” (Stephen, 2015).

This last qualifier seemed important, for news coverage repeatedly emphasised just how uncertain knowledge around this figure and around counter-terrorism in this region of the world could be. “[T]he truth about the man who lost an eye fighting the Russians in Afghanistan – or possibly in Algeria, fighting the military, depending on which source you believe – has always been as evasive as the man himself”, according to one analysis piece (J. White, 2015). Indeed, coverage of him in the past had speculated on his own personal and political motivations for the activities linked to him, noting his fractious relationship with Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) which led to him forming his own group before appearing to pledge allegiance once more to ‘Al Qaeda’ in general (Joscelyn, 2015). Belmokhtar’s ability to evade death and the opaqueness of his

motivations framed much of the coverage of his latest reported death, characterising this claim as tentative, difficult to verify and open to change. And sure enough, only a few days later, AQIM released a statement contradicting the Libyan government's claim, reporting instead that the militant was “alive and well, as he wanders and roams in the land of Allah, supporting his allies and vexing his enemies” (quoted in Fenton, 2015).

In reporting the death of Belmokhtar as tentative and unconfirmed, news coverage described the air strike itself as having left little trace that could be used for such confirmation. *The New York Times* stated that “forensic proof” was needed to “declare with certainty” that he had been killed, and that “[g]iven the likely extent of the damage — multiple bombs were dropped on the target, officials said — that determination could take some time”. Thus while American officials “confirmed... the target of the strike”, “they expressed caution about his fate” (Schmitt, 2015). The impression given here is that the air strike had left little public trace beyond ‘damage’ that was now being assessed. The official acknowledgement of the military operation, then, existed in the public sphere alongside inferential rumour: that Belmokhtar may have escaped death once again given his ability to do so in the past, that the lack of a statement of mourning from Al Qaeda could indicate he was still alive, that the Libyan statement was a premature boast. Just as Belmokhtar himself existed in rumour, so too did the circumstances around the air strike.

This press coverage reflects a significant difference between coverage of counter-terrorism in the Sahara and Sahel regions of North Africa and the representations of covert action discussed thus far: while the latter drew on documentation of the aftermaths of these operations, along with claims as to what had happened and the procedures that had shaped them, representations in this case have relied predominantly upon rumours circulating about these events in the absence of

other public residue. The relative lack of residue around covert operations in the Sahara-Sahel – that is, around operations whose reporting produced the suspicion that they were a secret being kept by one or more states from the public – poses an empirical challenge for this thesis. The foregoing chapters have examined how the combination of covert violence residue and a suspicion of secrecy can produce intimations, hints and allusions of absent people and objects implicated in these operations that shape the way the latter are represented. Yet covert action in the Sahara-Sahel, aimed at rescuing people kidnapped by terrorist-affiliated groups and at hunting down members of these groups, has had a slimmer and more circumspect public existence. Residue of these operations often extends little beyond rumour and speculation that variously emphasises the unconfirmed quality of the information contained therein, the unknown or questionable provenance of that information, and the fact that this information is contradicted by other claims. The aim of this chapter is to examine whether representations comprised of such rumour can produce intimations that shape the meaning of these unseen events.

In examining this possibility, the chapter considers the representational dynamics of rumour, particularly the ability of rumour to posit an ambiguous field of knowledge. By producing this field, rumours are able to shape a representation irrespective of claims of their truth or falsity, by emphasising their irresolvable possibility in a field of knowledge that remains unverifiable. The chapter combines this conceptualisation with an examination of the role that geographical qualities play in these representations. The long-standing U.S. and British state interest in North Africa as a potential terrorist threat has long been bolstered by a narrative premised on geography: the 'vast ungoverned spaces' of northern African states, filled with inhospitable desert and semi-arid terrain, have been interpreted as ideal for

fundamentalist Islamist groups to gather, train and carry out attacks without scrutiny or state governance (Raleigh and Dowd, 2013). There has been a centuries-old association in European and American discourse between north Africa, particularly the Sahara desert, and Islamist violence, beginning with accounts of European explorers and slavery pioneers and culminating in the nineteenth-century notion of the Sahara as an inhospitable void, into which Christians could fall without chance of escape owing to Muslim barbarism and slave trades (McDougall, 2007: 21-3).

Today, these discourses of the danger of the Saharan and Sahelian voids are echoed in discussions of abductions and kidnappings of foreign tourists and workers, variously attributed to Islamist terrorists or associated smugglers. These events have been covered in the press from 2003 onwards, spearheaded by the abduction of thirty-two foreigners, mostly Austrian, German and Swiss, in southeast Algeria. This kidnapping and those that have followed have been interpreted in media and policy circles as the most visible manifestations of a growing Islamist terrorist threat across the Sahara-Sahel requiring a militarised response (Harmon, 2010: 17, 22-3; Grobbelaar and Solomon, 2015: 154-5), an interpretation which ignores how counter-terrorism and decades-long repression of political movements has increased local disaffection and boosted fundamentalism (Graham IV, 2011: 590-6). This interpretation has nevertheless perpetuated, bolstered by ongoing kidnappings and abductions that range from one to five separate incidents each year, involving one to dozens to hostages at a time and continuing to the present day (see *Sahara Overland* (2016) for a list of kidnappings). Throughout coverage of these kidnappings, the landscapes of the Sahara and the Sahel have been referenced within rumours of hostage takers' activities – from assertions that the topography of this region affords them cover against efforts to detect their movements, to implicit notions that the kidnappers' familiarity and attunedness to this

terrain has enabled them to survive in these seemingly inhospitable areas for so long.

When coverage has turned to rumours of covert counter-terrorist responses to these kidnappings and hostage-takings, characteristics of the landscape have again appeared. At the same time, rumours of rescue attempts and manhunts for kidnappers have produced a suspicion of secrecy, through the frequent state silence that accompanies particular claims of military-intelligence activities and the sheer lack of public traces of rumoured operations. Rumour, landscape and secrecy thus all figure within these representations. This chapter examines how these three elements interact to shape the representation of these events. In doing so, the chapter extends the historical affiliation between covert counter-terrorism and lynching based on their public traces. Building on the third chapter's discussion of how lynching was defined nationally by the struggle to make sense of its position in U.S. society, and the idea in the fourth chapter that lynching perpetrators used secrecy to try to control the meaning of their violence, the present chapter examines how representations of lynching violence shaped the meaning of the natural landscapes where it took place. The frequent prosecution of lynching in the rural outdoors figured the latter as embodying that violence, with the natural landscape in turn making the lynching victim meaningful in terms of her social abandonment. Thus topography and natural objects helped perpetuate particular meanings for lynching violence.

This chapter uses the historical affiliation with lynching to analyse how a similar dynamic, of landscape making violence meaningful, is taking place in coverage of operations in the Sahara-Sahel: the natural landscape comes to embody the violence and so gives the latter meaning by reverberating with imprints left of that violence and its absences on the surface of the terrain. In particular, the chapter argues that the suspicion of secrecy surrounding rumours of these operations prompts a particular

understanding of the absence at the centre of these portrayals of landscape. Descriptions of the vast, barren homogeneity of the Saharan and Sahelian terrain juxtapose rumours of past or ongoing covert operations to implicitly emphasise the absence of material traces of these operations within the portrayed landscapes. At the same time, those rumours posit a field of ambiguous knowledge that becomes associated with these characteristics of the landscape. The geography of the region is figured as reflecting the ambiguity of knowledge. When these representations of landscape are then framed by a suspicion of secrecy, the absence of public traces becomes suggestive, intimating the possibility of the landscape's *complicity* in secrecy – the unverifiable idea that these geographical qualities are helping to conceal or obscure traces of covert operations. As with lynching, geographical markers are signified as appearing implicated in the prosecution of violence. This intimation, however, is signified as only a possibility, since knowledge in this region is represented as indefinite and difficult to verify. It is this combination of suggestiveness and unknowability that forms the intimated meaning and significance of these representations, shaping subject-positions focused on the instability of knowledge and the possible role of terrain in that instability.

In detailing this discursive dynamic, the chapter examines three different periods of press coverage of Sahara-Sahel covert action, using the eighteen British national newspapers noted in the Introduction and, due to the volume of coverage, *The New York Times* only in the U.S. as sources. The three periods cover all articles on kidnappings and rescue attempts in the region from the start of 2010 to the end of 2013; all articles on the hostage-taking at a gas plant in Algeria from 16th January to the start of February 2013; and all articles covering the manhunt for the hostage-taking's suspected organiser, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, from the time of the siege itself to May 2013, when it transpired that reports of the manhunt's success had been premature.

Rumours and the complicity of geography

The representations of covert operations discussed in previous chapters centred on traces left in those operations' wake. When identified as the remainders of unseen events, these traces were ascribed a quality of arbitrariness, an uneventfulness that made it unclear what exactly they could reveal about 'what happened'. But these traces also signified a suspicion of secrecy, a suspicion that these events were a secret the state was trying to keep from the public, and as a result that arbitrariness became significant. It indicated that some things had escaped secretion and might therefore be suggestive as to what had been kept hidden. That suggestiveness allowed the residue of covert violence to intimate things and ideas that were neither visible nor articulated.

In the case of representations of kidnappings and rescue attempts in the Sahara-Sahel, two aspects of the representations complicate the above dynamic. Firstly, these events are primarily reported through rumour. While the previous cases also involved rumour-based statements as to what took place out of public sight and who was involved, kidnappings and rescue attempts in the Sahara-Sahel exist in the public sphere almost entirely in rumours that are articulated and framed such that their speculative and indefinite quality is emphasised and appears to *declaim responsibility* for the veracity of their claims. As its basest, a rumour is simply a circulating statement or claim whose truth has not been confirmed. That such pieces of information are relied upon so heavily in coverage of Sahara-Sahel operations appears a consequence of journalists' inability to corroborate stories in a relatively untraversable part of the world for outsiders. Only the disappearance of foreign workers or tourists remained certain.

This deficit of well-corroborated information reflects Lecocq and Schrijver's

lament that when it comes to terrorism and counter-terrorism in the region, “nothing is known with any certainty”, due in part to “the very nature of the Sahara itself: the vastness of its area and the sparseness of its population, and the form its news takes”, with local media being scarce and “major sources of news” being “conversation and gossip” (Lecocq and Schrijver, 2007: 142). This deficit has shaped academic debate on covert action in the Sahar-Sahel, as demonstrated by the controversy that has met the work of anthropologist Jeremy Keenan, who claims to have unearthed evidence that counter-terrorism in the region “has involved the fabrication of a fiction of terrorism” (J. Keenan, 2009: 5), evidence qualified by others as “based on inference and rumours” (Richards, 2012: 495).

Within news accounts of counter-terrorism operations, however, these claims do not just remain unproven. They are articulated such that this lack of proof or confirmation is itself signified in a particular way, such that rumour operates in these representations not simply as a noun but as a verb. These representations indicate that *it is rumoured* that these events have taken place. In her discussion of the discursive dynamics of rumours and their circulation, Pamela Donovan argues that rumours can be articulated in multiple ways that imply different relations between the speaker of the rumour and the veracity of its claim. A rumour need not imply commitment by the speaker to that veracity; nor need the content of the rumour be articulated as unimpeachable or its veracity figured as key to the implied value of hearing it. ‘Belief in’ and ‘scepticism towards’ a rumour can mean quite different things to different speakers and listeners, reflecting different notions of the value of knowledge (Donovan, 2007: 74-5).

One notion in particular is relevant to rumours of covert action in the Sahara-Sahel. As Donovan details, articulations of rumour can imply that proving or disproving

the rumour is neither possible nor the point of 'taking the rumour to heart'. Articulated claims can signify their rumour quality by simultaneously implying an ambiguous field of knowledge surrounding the event in question: an articulation akin to saying 'who knows whether such-and-such has occurred'. This 'who knows' articulation produces the very ambiguity which gives the rumour discursive power, since it suggests that the rumour can neither be proved *nor disproved*. This suggestion allows certain implications of the rumour – its portrayal of a particular kind of world or of particular characteristics of actors – to shape a representation and thus a hearer's imaginary regardless of the rumour's apparent veracity. “*Not knowing*”, then, “is an intrinsic part of the appeal and spread of the rumour”, since “[b]y declaring some things simply unknowable... the possibility that a story is true [becomes] just as likely as that it is false”. This unknowability “helps preserve the 'lesson' or fearful meaning” of the rumour (ibid: 77, original emphasis). Such a rumour can therefore produce a subject-position that sees a particular field of knowledge as impenetrable to certainty while accepting the suggestibility of the rumour, the *possibility* and therefore significance of its content.

The field of knowledge around Sahara-Sahel kidnappings that these 'who knows' rumours colour as ambiguous is not, however, solely determined by those rumours. This speaks to the second aspect of these representations that complicates the dynamic of intimation. The cases of covert action discussed in previous chapters were publicly portrayed through traces of these operations in their aftermath, representational markers left in the wake of events that otherwise had gone unseen. When juxtaposed with the statement that an act of state violence had taken place, these markers produced state secrecy as a mere suspicion. This suspected secrecy in turn framed these markers as significant as public evidence of a covert operation and therefore rendered those markers suggestive as to what had taken place in secret.

Representations of covert action in the Sahara-Sahel stand out, then, in that there is often much less in the way of these public traces. To be precise, these representations often lack markers of material (or even less-than-material, dissipating, less tangible) traces of these operations deriving from the site where they are supposed to have occurred. There are fewer textual and visual accounts of what has been left behind by these operations; such traces are implicitly not within the public sphere. What *are* left behind and accessible are purported eyewitness testimonies of these events and, as discussed, rumours of what took place.

The particular quality of the representations being discussed, this *lack* of material trace, does not simply shape what is represented without drawing attention to itself; rather, these representations *signify* that lack as a representational marker in itself. As discussed in the second chapter, representations of the aftermath of covert operations are able to signify things which are not corporeally present in the representation, through the juxtaposition of the statement that an event took place and uneventful markers which do not appear to fit the presumed qualities of that posited event. These publicly-visible traces consequently mediate absent traces of the posited covert event, signifying particular ideas of what is absent (Bille et al, 2010: 10). The difference with representations of Sahara-Sahel operations is that such visible traces which would allow for this mediation are *themselves* frequently absent.

There are nonetheless representational markers that juxtapose the positing of an event: markers of the Saharan and Sahelian landscapes where these events are purported to have taken place. These textual and visual articulations of the Sahara-Sahel mostly lack obvious signs of military violence: descriptions and photographs of scorched and burnt objects, smoke and fire, ambiguous surface markings, and fragments of military equipment are much less frequent than in previous cases. What is articulated

instead is unremarkable and undifferentiated terrain and topography. These texts and images signify the uneventfulness theorised in this thesis, but of a different quality than in previous cases. The statement that an operation has taken place mostly juxtaposes geographical qualities which are seemingly untouched by military violence, signifying not only the arbitrariness of what is visible in the aftermath of these events but a sheer public lack of material trace of those events from where they supposedly took place. Alternatively, where such traces of a rumoured operation *are* represented, accompanying articulations of the spaces where the operation took place – of vast barren terrain, or of the material texture of sand or earth itself – signify that these traces are not simply arbitrary but are incredibly slight or at risk of dissipating. This again shapes a subject-position focused on the insubstantiality of what is left behind, the absence of more definite and enduring traces. Rather than be produced through present traces which point to it for meaning, then, absence is instead signified through *emptiness* within the landscape.

Absence is not an homogeneous category, however, and these geographical qualities produce a particular understanding of the meaning and significance of this lack of material trace. To analyse how this meaning is produced, this chapter draws on analysis of the discursive roles played by sparse and homogeneous landscape in representations of state violence. In his discussion of memoirs and films of soldiers who served in the Gulf War, Geoffrey Wright argues that geographical qualities of the desert, specifically its vast and undifferentiated topography, are figured as reflecting soldiers' psychological disorientation. The inability to orient oneself in "the sand and the open expanse of it" becomes a metaphor for these soldiers' emotional trauma and psychological disorientation (Wright, 2009: 1680). In addition, traces of military action such as uniforms and maps are represented as having been stained or bleached by the

material substance of desert sand. Framed as being part of soldiers' attempts to understand 'what happened' during their tours of duty, these representations allow "the desert" to "inscribe... [the] past on the surface of these artefacts... infus[ing] the uniform with particular shades of meaning". For instance, the obscuration of old maps by layers of sand in Anthony Swofford's memoir *Jarhead* "does not make [Swofford's] past legible so much as it represents the past's illegibility" (ibid: 1679). Textual and visual markers of the landscape, in other words, are able to overlap or conjoin traces of past military violence so that together they act as metaphorical markers, shaping the meanings attached to that violence by representing those meanings through metaphor.

This conceptualisation of the metaphorical potential of geography opens a way to analysing representations which lack the kind of residue discussed in previous chapters. In this case, however, characteristics of the landscape shape the meaning of covert operations not through the explicit articulation of metaphor by journalists, but through the landscape's juxtaposition with rumours that produce a suspicion of state secrecy.

In elaborating this analysis, the chapter extends the historical affiliation between covert counter-terrorism and lynching practice, associating the two practices through their residue's shared representation within natural landscapes. As a response to societal changes brought on by modernity, including increased free movement and property ownership among African-Americans, lynchers' act of hanging black citizens outdoors – so that their feet could not touch the ground – reiterated those citizens' continued landlessness, their dispossession of a home and private land of their own (Alexandre, 2008: 72-86). This violence also brutally regulated the movement of newly-free African-Americans and so discursively curtailed their equal 'ownership' of public space (ibid: 85-6, 98-9, 102). Crucially, these significations relied upon the spaces where lynchings were

perpetrated: outdoor public places with suitable objects to hang bodies from. As such, those spaces and their objects became *part of* and *shaped* the meaning signified by that violence. In the case of lynchings committed in rural settings, narratives and photography of black bodies dangling from trees signified the rural outdoors as dangerous for black citizens and figured that space as one of social abandonment: with their hanging bodies left in the uninhabited wilderness, lynched black citizens and the social problems they represented were 'cast out' of society, along with the violence itself (ibid: 93-100). Stripped of any markers of their social relations, the meaning of those lynch victims' deaths and the violence involved was shaped instead by the landscape in which they were found, dissuading interest in the social world of the victim (ibid: 87-8).

This discursive dynamic relied on the lynch victim's body being infused with meaning by the natural landscape, just as material traces of the Gulf War were made meaningful through their contact with the desert. Lynch victims left in the outdoors signified landlessness and abandonment through their being relentlessly exposed to nature in public space, "hanging on trees left to the vagaries of the weather" (ibid: 89). Being 'tainted' by the outdoors in this way, the wider social context of these murdered bodies was marginalised from the meaning of the violence, as the natural landscape was represented as the relevant context of these events (ibid: 99). In this way, the spatiality of lynching implicated the natural landscape in the violence: the meaning of rural outdoor spaces was seen to be shaped by lynching perpetrators at the expense of black citizens. Literary narratives of lynching therefore emphasised how, as a result of the violence that took place within them, the trees and forests of the American South appeared to actually embody that violence, retaining and signifying the memory of unseen lynchings (Phillips, 2014: 467-70). Stories of lynching in one place could "transform, or reinvent, one's understanding of nature, regardless of geographical location", turning trees and

forests into signifiers of lynching violence even for those who had not witnessed that violence. Narrations of lynchings could therefore produce a subject-position that associated aspects of nature with trauma, whereby the seemingly-benign landscape alluded to those black bodies “hanging, unnoticed, in the woods” (ibid: 471, 477).

The natural landscape emerged in African-American writers' narratives of lynching as made up of “see-no-evil, hear-no-evil natural objects” that appeared to be “themselves in cahoots with the social forces teeming against their black bodies' very existence” (Alexandre, 2008: 77). By overlapping traces of lynching violence, the natural objects of the landscape made those traces meaningful in reflecting social abandonment and a disconnect between the violence and wider society. That in turn gave the landscape itself meaning as being somehow implicated in this violence. The meaning-making role of the landscape, however, meant that the representational dynamics of lynching violence need not remain under the control of lynching sympathisers; geographical qualities had the potential to 'taint' that violence in different ways, again explaining the need to 'fix' certain meanings through the secreted circulation of lynching postcards and, over time, the secretion of the practice itself in those 'unnoticed' spaces (ibid: 91-3; Rushdy, 2012: 93-4, 97-100).

In extending the historical affiliation with lynching, the present chapter examines whether this representational dynamic, whereby geographical qualities come to embody and shape the meaning of violence, exists around covert counter-terrorism. Through this analysis, the chapter will argue that the natural landscape of North Africa is implicated in, and shapes the meaning of, covert violence – not through its rumoured or even witnessed effects upon bodies, however, but through its association with non-bodily residue, in particular rumours of unseen operations. When detailing rumours of unseen events, news coverage articulates qualities of the landscape where these events

take place. With these events implicitly contextualised by this geography, the contrast between the vastness and barrenness of this terrain and claims of unseen kidnappings and state responses signifies the absence of public traces within these spaces. This allows those geographical qualities to reflect and embody, in a metaphorical fashion, the ambiguous field of knowledge signified by these rumours. These unseen events thus gain meaning through these qualities, with the natural landscape 'tainting' the signified absence of substantial markers, along with any slight material traces that are portrayed as having been made opaque by the desert sand.

At the same time, a suspicion of secrecy produced by these rumours and obscured traces frames this landscape as suggestive regarding what is absent. While in previous chapters a suspicion of state secrecy framed public traces as significant in having avoided secretion, here secrecy makes the landscape itself appear significant, since that landscape is represented as constituting the spaces where these operations took place while barely leaving a mark upon it. Through this framing, those same represented qualities of the landscape's texture and topography that embody the ambiguity of knowledge are figured as suggestive regarding events that have been conducted covertly within these spaces. This interplay between the unknowability fostered by rumours, geographical qualities and suspicions of secrecy produces meaning in excess of what is explicitly articulated, intimating ideas about what remains absent within these landscapes.

The result, as argued in the following sections, is that just as representations of rural lynchings represented the natural landscape as complicit in the violence, so these representations intimate the equivocal possibility that the terrain of the Sahara-Sahel is helping to keep aspects of ongoing counter-terrorism hidden. These intimations therefore shape subject-positions which, as before, focus on the difficulty in making

sense of unseen violence. The difference here, however, is that these intimations link that struggle to comprehend not to ephemerality, as with drone strikes, or to secreted bodies, as with the bin Laden raid. Instead, they produce a subject-position focused on the idea that the landscape itself is making ongoing covert activities inscrutable. The rumours which constitute residue of these activities signify that proving or disproving such a notion is beside the point; it is the mere possibility that is significant.

Kidnappings and rescue attempts

Kidnap scenarios in the Sahara-Sahel are invariably represented through statements which are implicitly unconfirmed. The way they are articulated signifies that their claims are unverifiable, their veracity inscrutable, while linking that unverifiability to the region itself. This is part of these rumours' discursive power, since disproving them consequently appears impossible. At the same time, descriptions of landscape emphasise the lack of material trace of these kidnappings. The representation of this geography alongside rumours, however, produces a suspicion of secrecy which allows qualities of the landscape to allude to the *possibility* of ongoing covert rescue missions that remain hidden due to geography, just as the terrain appears to allow kidnappers to elude detection.

When rumours of secret rescue attempts are articulated more explicitly, their juxtaposition with these same geographical markers highlights the absence of material traces of these attempts. That absence then becomes suggestive: not just of secrecy but of the landscape's *possible complicity* in that secrecy, a complicity in keeping these operations hidden. Being articulated in rumour, however, these accounts also portray the landscape as unknowable, with the truth or falsity of the rumours circulating within

it figured as unverifiable. This shapes a subject-position from which these operations are meaningful in terms of a perceived inability to determine whether or not kidnappers and covert agents really are responsible for different things rumoured to be taking place here.

When seven workers at a uranium mine in Arlit, Niger were reported captured in September 2010, coverage relied upon rumours and speculative statements which emphasised that they were unconfirmed. *The New York Times'* initial report began by stating that “[s]even people connected to a French nuclear company in Niger were kidnapped on Thursday” in Arlit, this according to a French Foreign Ministry spokesperson. The article then immediately shifts geographical perspective by noting President Sarkozy's promise that “France will do everything to liberate them, as we do each time” (de la Baume, 2010). The fact that almost all the information given in the article comes from French or Niger government sources juxtaposes the statement of the kidnapping to signify a lack of public traces from the site of the kidnapping itself. Indeed, the French spokesperson says the hostages “had been captured in two locations” without providing any more detail, emphasising an absence of traces from those locations (ibid).

The same spokesperson says there is “no immediate claim of responsibility”. This expression of uncertainty about the kidnappers accompanies a Niger government statement that “the workers were kidnapped by a group of 7 to 30 men who spoke Arabic and Tamashek, the language spoken by the region's Tuareg tribes” (ibid). Given the lack of material trace, these two statements figure the latter claim as of unclear provenance, emphasising the ambiguity over the number of people and the speculative use of language to indicate the kidnappers' political affinities. Further statements are also characterised as rumour. The two French companies employing those kidnapped

are quoted as “confirm[ing] the kidnappings” while “provid[ing] no details on how [they] had occurred”. This statement frames a subsequent reference to a Reuters report that “a local businessman and a mining official had said the victims were taken from their houses overnight while they slept” (ibid). The framing signifies that the latter eyewitness testimony is a speculative and unconfirmed account which can neither prove nor disprove how the kidnappers were able to carry out this action.

These rumours and speculations are framed by discussion of the Sahel region. “The Sahel zone is extremely dangerous” and “we must redouble vigilance”, says President Sarkozy, while Areva has “recently become more concerned about potential threats from a Tuareg militant movement and from Al Qaeda’s north African affiliate” in Niger. The article ends by highlighting previous kidnappings in the region by both Tuareg rebels and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (ibid). These accounts of the past danger of the region frame rumours of the present kidnapping as entirely plausible; those rumours, however, continue to signify that definite information is being hampered by a dearth of public traces. With those rumours positioned as possibly reflecting a *region-wide* threat, that dearth and the consequent uncertainty over the identities and actions of the kidnappers is associated with that region. Geographical qualities thus frame this kidnapping as meaningful in the context of a regional threat, but in doing so the landscape of the Sahel is implicitly signified as a space where confirming details of such events is difficult.

Within that suggestibility and unknowability, coverage is able to intimate the possibility of ongoing covert rescue attempts being hidden by the landscape. The report of the kidnapping in the London *Times* used past kidnappings to speculate on possible responses from France, first noting that “[a]ccording to security sources, millions of dollars in ransoms have been paid [in past cases], although these have never been

publicly confirmed". France itself is reported as making clear to armed groups through its "military and intelligence services" that "Paris will no longer negotiate", while countries in the region have "open[ed] a joint military headquarters deep in the desert" in response to the threat of terrorism (Bremner, 2010). These brief references to past state action and military bases produce secrecy as the barest suspicion, that unseen activities in the region may be being kept hidden by the French state. These statements and that secrecy exist alongside references to "the remote desert" where previous kidnappings have occurred and references to the area's vast expanse, with Arlit lying "500 miles (800km) northeast of Niamey, the capital". The kidnappers themselves are described as having escaped into this vast remoteness, with eyewitnesses claiming that "[t]he kidnappers' trucks were seen driving north towards the base of AQIM, an Algerian-led terrorist group that regards France as its main foreign enemy" (ibid).

Speculative references to past French state responses and hints of a military presence are thus framed by references to the nondescript vast remoteness of the Sahara-Sahel into which the kidnappers themselves disappeared. These references to the landscape emphasise the absence of material evidence of any state response to the kidnapping. That absence, however, is made suggestive by secrecy, intimating the possibility that a covert response is ongoing while remaining hidden in that same remote desert. The natural landscape is alluded to as being *complicit* in suspected state secrecy. This possibility is represented as unverifiable within the field of indefinite knowledge associated with this landscape, but for the same reason it appears difficult to disprove. Framed by secrecy, unconfirmed rumours of past ransom payments and references to French military capabilities therefore intimate that the Sahel is a place where covert action *could* be taking place but may be remaining hidden; the rumour basis of this allusion signifies that proving or disproving it is a fool's errand.

Geographical qualities continued to shape accounts of kidnappings and rescue efforts. Coverage of the February 2013 kidnapping of foreign construction workers in Jama're, northern Nigeria, implicitly highlighted the ability of the kidnappers to disappear without a trace. One *Daily Mail* article described the kidnappers as having “attacked a prison and set two police vehicles on fire before killing a guard” at a workers' camp owned by constructed company Setraco. The article contrasts this knowledge with the relaying of the event by local government authorities, and a British Foreign and Commonwealth Office statement that “[w]e are aware of reports and are making enquiries with the authorities”, hinting at officials' uncertainty as to where the kidnappers have gone. Meanwhile, accompanying photographs show not traces of the kidnapping but Setraco promotional materials of long, empty roads they have built in Nigeria (V. Allen, 2013). The region itself is then referenced: “[w]hile no-one has claimed responsibility so far”, the article continues, “Islamic extremists have carried out a bloody guerilla campaign in the past year, including kidnappings and murders”, some of which are then briefly detailed. The past history of the geographical area is used to speculate on the identity of the kidnappers, while the same area is implicitly signified as allowing the kidnappers to elude detection. This speculation on identity, however, is qualified by the note that while the kidnapping of two men last year in Nigeria was attributed by authorities to “[g]unmen [with] links to Boko Haram”, “[t]he sect later denied taking part in that abduction” (ibid). These statements implicitly figure northern Nigeria as a place where rumours are difficult to prove or disprove owing to a lack of substantial traces of events.

Having signified this unknowability, later reports alluded to the possibility that the landscape made it difficult to assess both kidnappers' and *covert agents'* actions. A month after the Jama're kidnapping, it was reported that the hostages had been executed

by their kidnappers, now identified as Ansaru. Coverage of this claim – itself portrayed as rumour, with Setraco stating it “had heard nothing of any harm done to the hostages” – describes the British Ministry of Defence as “refus[ing] to comment on claims by the Islamist group Ansaru... that the murders were provoked by the arrival of British fighters jets in Nigeria amid rumours of a rescue mission”. Ansaru itself is quoted as claiming that “sightings of British military planes in the region... had triggered the decision” to execute the hostages (Owen, 2013). This claim of what Ansaru calls “[t]he Nigerian and British operation” is framed as rumour by other parties' responses: the British Foreign Office asks people “not to speculate at this extremely sensitive time”, while Nigerian officials “cast doubt on the claims by Ansaru”, saying that “[a]s far as I'm concerned, and to the best of my knowledge, nothing like that has happened”. An “intelligence official in the north” is also reported as having “doubted the report, although he said some suspects linked to the kidnapping had been arrested last week” (ibid). These contradictory and dismissive statements produce a mere suspicion of state secrecy around this unconfirmed operation.

These rival accounts of what has happened are contextualised by the statement that this execution comes a year after another failed rescue bid in Nigeria. Through this contextualisation, the rumours of both execution and rescue attempt are linked to the suggestive past of this geographical area; the claim of a failed rescue is implicitly supported by inference from what has previously taken place. This suggestiveness, however, is tied to implicit unknowability: these rumours emphasise their unverified quality, originating in claims of hearing or not hearing things, seeing or not seeing things, figuring this area as one where such claims can neither be proved nor disproved. Framed by a suspicion of secrecy, these claims intimate the possibility that the inscrutability of this area allows covert action to take place and remain largely unseen,

without leaving a material trace. This shapes a subject-position which sees the kidnappers and covert agents as mirroring one another in this regard: when police and intelligence officials refer to their own doubt over 'reports' of 'what has happened', it remains unclear whether they are referring to the executions, the rescue attempt, or both.

Through allusions to potential 'geographical secrecy', rumours of what has taken place in the Sahel are represented as significant not in terms of their truth – since this remains unknowable – but in terms of their “lesson' or fearful meaning” which is “preserve[d]” by the “atmosphere of ambiguity” that the rumours themselves foster (Donovan, 2007: 77). That lesson is the *possibility* of the region harbouring secret state operations without their leaving a material trace. Intimations from absence, the lack of residue of covert action, are thus able to reshape the meaning and significance of these representations. At the same time as hinting at possible secrecy and linking that secrecy to the landscape, those intimations render the rumoured events as unconfirmed, inviting newsreaders to focus on their unverifiability. Once again, the inability to comprehend covert action that has gone unseen implicitly defines these representations for witnesses, only this time it is a result of rumours and descriptions of landscape giving meaning to one another.

Topography and texture at In Amenas

The hostage-taking at a gas plant near the town of In Amenas, Algeria in January 2013 was significantly different from the kidnappings that had previously taken place in the Sahara and Sahel regions. This was a hostage-taking where the perpetrators had stayed put, storming the gas complex before barricading themselves in as they were cordoned

off and surrounded by Algerian special forces. The disappearing act of kidnappers was not a central plank of news coverage. But the stationary position of the unfolding event did not guarantee a public view of what was happening. Frequent suspicions were raised in news coverage of secrecy surrounding the actions of Algeria's special forces and its broader counter-terrorism programme, suspicions made possible by journalists being barred from the In Amenas site while the siege of the plant was ongoing. The result was that journalists were forced to rely on rumour and speculation as to what was happening at the cordoned-off site. In articulating these rumours, coverage drew on geographical qualities, referring to the topography of the area, the material texture of the North African desert, and previous kidnappings in the region. This allowed the desert to take on a metaphorical role: vastness, barrenness and homogeneity were figured as embodying the difficulty of proving or disproving activities in the region which lacked public traces. At the same time, a suspicion of secrecy around these rumours juxtaposed the absence of residue that was signified by uneventful geography. In so doing, secrecy made these geographical qualities suggestive, allowing the landscape to intimate its possible complicity in the secretion of rumoured actions and events.

Coverage of the hostage-taking and subsequent siege frequently indicated the unverifiable or ambiguous quality of rumours about these events in ways that referred to the surrounding landscape. The *New York Times* front page story the day after the attack stated that “armed attackers in unmarked trucks” had seized a natural gas field and that “[h]undreds of Algerian security forces” had been sent to surround it, before noting that “[m]any details of the assault on the gas field *in a barren desert near Libya's border* remained murky” (Nossiter and Sayare, 2013b, emphasis added). The article indicates uncertainty surrounding the assault with reference to the barrenness of the area's topography, positing a lack of clarity and implicitly linking it to that topography:

barrenness contextualises that murkiness. The article then acknowledges “unconfirmed reports late on Wednesday” that “the security forces had tried to storm the compound and had retreated under gunfire from the hostage takers” (ibid). The articulation of this rumour acts to declaim responsibility for its veracity, with ‘there are reports’ emphasising its external and unclear provenance. Other details come from “claims by the attackers quoted by regional news agencies” and from Algerian state officials, while “[a]n oil company official who had knowledge of the attack” claims that the attackers’ shutting down of production at the site was “an indication of carefully [sic] planning” (ibid). Again, these claims disavow responsibility for their veracity and emphasise their unconfirmed inferential status.

The article goes on to highlight that “how and why [the hostage-takers] chose In Amenas, *which is more than 700 miles* from the Malian border and is much closer to Libya, were among the unknowns” (ibid, emphasis added). Here, the vast barrenness of the Algerian desert discursively overlaps the sparseness and ambiguity of information around the hostage-taking, with the former framing and implicitly reflecting the latter as a result. The article then notes that “Islamist groups and bandits have long operated in the deserts of western and northern Africa”, including the “vast expanse of northern Mali”, indicating the huge size of the relevant topography. The article further states that “regular kidnappings have occurred in the West African desert in recent years”, with “seven French citizens... presently being held” (ibid). The suggestive history of the geographical area is thus used to speculate on the hostage-takers’ unknown motive and capabilities, making the gas field siege meaningful in terms of the indefinite dangers of the Saharan desert.

The article ends with a drawing showing the “Site of seized gas field” within Algeria and Algeria’s position relative to other North African countries, on a bare-bones

map that displays few other markings besides the town of In Amenas (ibid). The desert is related to the siege through visual characteristics of its size and apparent homogeneity. The online version of the article was accompanied by an “undated photo” of the gas field: displaying motionless Toyotas and a stretch of sand in front of gas tanks and two lone distant figures, the image signifies its uneventfulness, showing no sign of an Islamist takeover. In the context of rumours which emphasise their uncertainty, this atemporal image of flat uneventful desert implicitly signifies the absence of publicly-available residue from the site itself (Nossiter and Sayare, 2013a; Figure 16).



Figure 16: An “undated photo” of the In Amenas gas field (Nossiter and Sayare, 2013a).

Initial coverage of the assault and siege therefore drew upon rumours that signified an ambiguous field of knowledge while referencing the geography and topography of the area. As with discourse around rural lynchings, the natural landscape contextualises and comes to embody aspects of these events: the vast homogeneity of

the area contextualises and implicitly represents the sparse and indefinite quality of information, while the uneventful barrenness is referenced alongside and reflects the inability to know what exactly is happening at the gas site. At the same time, the absence of public traces and the relaying of rumours through Algerian and oil company spokespersons signify a suspicion of secrecy surrounding the siege. Alongside these landscape references, this suspicion makes the absence of public material traces suggestive, intimating the idea that the unknowability of the landscape, as metaphorically reflected in its vast barrenness, is complicit in this secrecy. The subject-position produced is one focused on the landscape, its possible role in shaping the ongoing siege, and the difficulty in proving either way.

As the siege continued over the following days, the press continued to articulate rumours of how the assault had occurred in ways which drew on the geography of the surrounding area. The kidnappers were described as elusive figures able to avoid scrutiny in the public sphere; indeed, “[u]ntil yesterday morning” according to one *Observer* piece, “few outside the specialised world of those who track north African jihadists groups affiliated with al-Qaida had heard of Abdul Rahman al-Nigeri”, the suspected ringer-leader of the assault on the plant. The same piece then implicitly speculated on the importance of landscape in this elusiveness, noting that “[t]he Libyan government yesterday denied as “baseless” claims that the attackers had crossed into Algeria from a base in south-west Libya”, while “[o]ther claims have suggested that the group – some 40 strong, equipped with four-wheel drive vehicles and satellite phones and heavily armed – started from Niger” (Beaumont, 2013). That these claims have unclear provenance or are flatly denied by state sources signifies their rumour quality. They are also linked to geographical features, namely the large distances within the Sahara, while references to satellite phones and 4x4 vehicles imply that the landscape is

difficult to traverse and navigate. The juxtaposition of rumour and landscape allows the latter to form the context for these details, making those rumours meaningful in terms of the vast distances of the Sahara. This in turn signifies those distances as implicitly embodying the ambiguity of knowledge around the kidnappers' movements and spread, their ability to elude detection across seemingly inscrutable spaces.

What is significant about this link between the landscape and the kidnappers' elusiveness is that it mirrors intimations of a counter-terrorist response. The remoteness of the In Amenas site was firstly articulated as having shaped the way the initial assault unfolded. "Until the siege on the remote In Amenas facility last Wednesday," according to the *New York Times*, "dozens of North African desert camps were thought to be virtually impregnable, with steel-wire fences, long-range reconnaissance equipment and army patrols amid the sand dunes. But when the attackers came, taking dozens of foreign workers hostage, they faced little opposition... The attack clearly caught everybody by surprise" (Krauss and Kurlish, 2013). Implicit in this statement, reported alongside speculation that a lack of armed guards allowed the kidnappers to take over the plant easily, is the idea that the remoteness of the site shaped how the event unfolded. Remoteness is thus signified as relevant context for the kidnappers' capabilities. At the same time, the references to further gas installations and patrols among sand dunes signify a wider area of the Sahara as relevant to understanding this event. Remaining unseen themselves, however, these other sites also signify the absence of information about what is going on 'out there' in the Sahara desert. The landscape is once again framed as reflecting the ambiguous state of knowledge over possible responses to the siege. There is no explicit discussion here of covert counter-terrorism. But in the context of discussion of the ongoing hidden siege of the gas plant, the Saharan landscape is represented as significant in being a suggestive

but inscrutable space.

When a counter-terrorist response was discussed, the metaphorical quality of the landscape produced intimations of things left unsaid. Journalists noted that “[t]he confusion” over how many people had been killed during the hostage-taking and subsequent Algerian assaults on the gas plant “reflected the murky circumstances at the gas field, *near a remote town* in southeastern Algeria”. Indeed, “[s]enior Algerian officials, *hundreds of miles away in Algiers*” were described as saying they were “in the dark themselves about some aspects of the events”, taking place at a “gas complex *deep in the Sahara*” (Nossiter, 2013, emphases added). Uncertainty around Algerian actions and references to being ‘in the dark’ signify secrecy as a mere possibility. The remoteness of the site contextualises these statements, such that remoteness implicitly reflects the difficulty in knowing what is taking place. The suspicion of secrecy makes this remoteness appear significant, since it exists in lieu of any public trace of events. This framing intimates the unverifiable idea that the remoteness of the landscape is complicit in secrecy surrounding the raid.

Other articles produced this intimation sparsely but suggestively. One *Guardian* piece’s narration of the siege begins by evoking the site’s location: “*Deep in the desert*, special forces lay in wait, encircling a vast gas facility”. The piece then notes the speculative claim of an assault by Algerian troops on the complex: “By midday, the Algerian special forces had launched a military operation at the site”, but “[i]t was unclear how the rescue operation began” (Chrisafis and Borger, 2013). This account of an operation is framed by a reference to the remote desert, hinting at the impenetrability of the siege site through an image of the landscape. This allows the latter to implicitly represent the imperceptibility of the siege. Indeed, given “an absence of reliable information from a crisis scene *in one of the world’s least accessible deserts*”, states

The Times, all outsiders have to go on are “[r]eports emanating from the remote complex” which “flatly contradict each other” (Fletcher, 2013, emphasis added). This reference to geography provide implicit context for this contradictory information, giving the siege meaning in terms of its inaccessibility within this desert and allowing the latter to embody the contradictory nature of information. At the same time, the cordoning-off of the site hints at ongoing secrecy. This frames the remoteness of the site as suggestive, intimating the idea of the landscape's complicity in that secrecy by making it difficult to confirm or deny claims of Algeria's actions. Crucially, this intimation gives the representation of the siege meaning in terms of the natural landscape; the subject-position which is shaped by this intimation is one which sees the siege as significant in terms of the possible role of the desert in producing uncertainty. As with rural lynchings, the socio-political dynamics of this violence are delimited by a natural context.

Allusions to the landscape's complicity grew through references to the texture and topography of the Sahara, with the materiality of sand metaphorically tainting sparse residue of the gas plant siege. Having noted the lack of definite information regarding the Algerian special forces assault, one *Guardian* article describes the scene of “the biggest and most dramatic foreign hostage-taking raid seen in Algeria or the Sahel”: “The convoluted metal tubes, glowing eerily under bright night lights in *a vast expanse of flat featureless desert*, give the gas field in the settlement at Tigantourine the look of *an outpost on an alien planet*, and it is scarcely more hospitable” (Chrisafis and Borger, 2013, emphases added). Within surrounding claims about Algeria's actions that highlight the inability to prove or disprove them, these descriptions of the landscape become associated with that uncertainty. The otherworldliness of the gas plant, with its eerie metallic construction, contextualises and thus gives meaning to the inability to verify

what is happening there; this uncanniness implicitly reflects the plant's inscrutability. The flatness and featurelessness of the sandy expanse signifies the slightness and uneventfulness of what is seemingly accessible to journalists. At the same time, references to a lack of information from the site produce a suspicion of secrecy, which frames this alien and featureless desert as significant in nonetheless being visible in the public sphere. With these landscape qualities emphasising the absence of any other residue, they hint at the idea that this disorienting and otherworldly terrain is keeping Algeria's actions hidden and inscrutable. The landscape is implicitly represented as preventing knowledge of what is going on, shaping a subject-position focused on the suggestiveness of the landscape.

This suggestiveness extended to accounts of what was taking place around the gas complex in the aftermath of the Algerian special forces assault. With the hostage-takers having been killed by Algerian troops, attention turned to those hostages who remained unaccounted to. A senior Algerian official was quoted in the *New York Times* as saying of five missing foreign workers: "They've disappeared. We're not just going to abandon them like that". The same article goes on to describe the successful escape of other hostages, implicitly as a speculation on what those missing workers might be going through. These successful escapees are described as having aimed for a "beacon of burning gas in the distance", "walk[ing] over barren terrain of sand and rocks and small hills, from about 2 a.m. until the late afternoon with only short breaks", and as having struggled to see the gas flame by dawn. Even once they saw vehicles in the distance they "feared they might be the assailants" (Kulish, 2013).

In describing the ordeal of escaped hostages, the article articulates the barrenness and the texture of the surrounding landscape and implies that this terrain has the ability to disorient people, such that they disappear into the desert. The barren

texture of the desert sand contextualises and implicitly embodies the inscrutability of the area, the inability to establish what has happened to hostages. This accompanies a suspicion of secrecy around Algeria's actions during and after the siege, signified by surrounding reports and this article's own reference to it being "unclear" who the Algerians were supposedly looking for (ibid). This disorienting barrenness is thus framed by secrecy as significant in standing in place of any public traces, alluding to the landscape's possible role in having shaped what has taken place at the gas site, given its ability to disorient people, while preventing clarity over current activities.

Allusions from the seemingly empty terrain reached its apogee in coverage which drew on visual markers of the desert to articulate rumours of the ongoing siege. The day after the kidnappers were reported as having stormed the plant, *The Guardian* produced an online "interactive" graphic of the "In Amenas gas field attack" (P. Allen, 2013; Figure 17). Immediately noticeable is the lack of actual interaction. The graphic involves two alternating images, the first a satellite photograph of Algeria indicating the gas field's location relative to the town of In Amenas, and noting the time the assault began, 5am, "when heavily armed Islamists arrived at the living quarters in three vehicles". Viewers then click 'Next >>' and the graphic 'zooms in' to show a new map, this time a satellite image pinpointing the gas complex, the residential areas and the road to the airport, accompanied by a sparse timeline of the kidnappers' actions and the Algerian army's response. The timeline emphasises the partiality of knowledge of what took place, containing details of how the militants attacked and took over the plant but fewer on Algeria's response: the timeline states that after the Algerian army "storm the complex" and fire on fleeing insurgents, "[d]eaths [are] reported", before jumping to the following day when "AFP reports that the accommodation area has now been secured" but that an indefinite number of hostage-takers have taken refuge further inside the

complex (P. Allen, 2013).

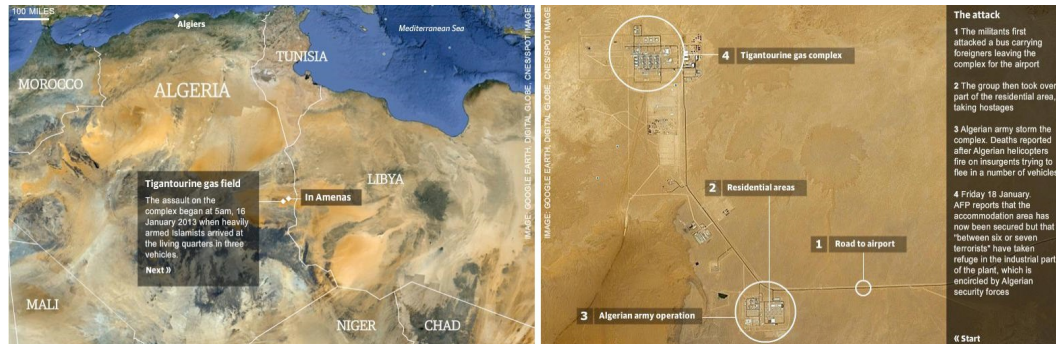


Figure 17: Interactive graphic from *The Guardian* of the In Amenas gas field attack (P. Allen, 2013).

The first of the two maps shows an area of north Africa thousands of miles squared while providing no glimpse of violence itself, only locating it near the Algerian-Libyan border. The photographed topography signifies only the vast size of the Saharan desert. The second photograph, meanwhile, emphasises its uneventfulness by being framed as relating to an ongoing siege: in contrast to that event, the photo shows only a flat and undifferentiated desert expanse dotted with static and unpopulated roads and buildings. The siege itself is conspicuous in its invisibility - indeed, there is no indication of *when* the satellite photo was taken, a note on the left simply stating that it is taken from Google Earth. The image consequently signifies the inscrutability and inaccessibility of the siege from the public sphere, with newsreaders provided only an uneventful and atemporal glimpse of the gas complex and surrounding desert.

Accompanying a timeline whose sparse and indefinite details signify the speculative quality of information on the siege, this uneventful image become

metaphorical: viewers' aerial and temporal distance from a visually-abstract and featureless space implicitly reflects this inscrutability of events at the gas plant. Visual qualities of the landscape therefore contextualise the absence of clear public traces of unseen violence. The implicit notion of ongoing Algerian secrecy around the site then makes this featurelessness suggestive: because it relates to ongoing secret state action, the desert is framed as significant in terms of the inscrutability that it is represented as embodying. This dynamic thus alludes to the metaphorically-inscrutable landscape as complicit, as somehow helping to keep these events and any material trace obscured in public. Viewers are invited to understand the siege through the suggestive lack of material residue within this flat featureless terrain.

Photographs from the ground shaped similar subject-positions. Alongside details of a lack of certainty over the number of hostages killed during an Algerian assault on the plant, and the statement that “[t]here were also questions about the tactics used by the Algerians to break the hostage standoff”, one front-page piece carried a photograph of “[t]he In Amenas gas facility where yesterday's operation to free hostages ended in fatalities” (Borger and Winter, 2013; Figure 18). The image emphasises the distance between the camera's vantage point and the gas plant, with a trail of rocks through the sand designating a road stretching from the foreground to the plant in the far distance. The flat barrenness of the foreground's terrain signifies the image's uneventfulness in relation to the hostage-taking and subsequent assault. Once again, the image's temporal relation to events – whether this is a stock image of the plant or one taken during the out-of-sight siege – is unclear. Given the rumours surrounding the Algerian assault, the emphasised distance and barrenness contextualise and implicitly embody the inaccessibility of the site, and the consequent inability to prove or disprove claims about what is happening. The landscape of the surrounding desert is implicitly

figured as a place where knowledge is difficult to attain. Because these surrounding rumours also convey a suspicion of Algerian state secrecy, this terrain is framed as significant in lieu of public traces of the siege, intimating that the landscape may be playing a role in that secrecy. Images of flat featureless sand become metaphors for the inscrutability of events, defining those events by the evocative lack of residue within this barren terrain.



Figure 18: Photograph of the In Amenas gas facility (Borger and Winter, 2013).

Once the siege of the Tigantourine plant was declared over – after some confusion over whether all the hostage-takers had been killed – journalists were finally allowed access to the gas complex, resulting in descriptions of the plant and living quarters. These descriptions continued to allude to the the desert as shaping and obscuring residue of unseen events. One *New York Times* front-page piece in early February offered the suggestion, through new hostage testimonies, of the hostage-takers' original intention to blow up the plant, while those same testimonies were

qualified as contradicting Algerian statements on the hostage-takers' actions. As a result, the piece argues, "questions remain" over whether more lives could have been saved by Algerian special forces, while "[w]hat happened next" after the terrorists attempted to move the hostages in 4x4 cars and the Algerians attacked them "is still unclear" (Nossiter and Kulish, 2013). In referencing 'questions' over Algeria's actions, the article points to the rumour that those actions led to the loss of hostages' lives, while also signifying ambiguity around information in the aftermath of the siege.

Alongside such rumour is a representation of the site of the siege, with the article stating that to visit the plant is "to appreciate... its vulnerability" given its distance from other towns; indeed, "[t]he isolation appears total; there is nothing around it but *a sea of sand*" (ibid, emphasis added). The vast barrenness and material texture of the terrain is thus emphasised and contextualises the uncertainty over what took place. The article then describes material traces left in the wake of the siege that can finally be documented: the "fierceness of the fight... is still evident" in the form of bullet holes and "deep gashes" in a wall, while "a jumble of shredded, carbonised vehicle remnants *stick out of the sand*" (ibid, emphasis added). The physical proximity of sand and material residue of secreted violence becomes metaphorical in the context of rumour: the inability to prove or disprove claims about the siege is implicitly embodied in this obscuring of residue by the desert. Meanwhile, the remoteness of the gas complex in a large flat expanse resonates with references to a lack of definite knowledge about what took place while the complex was sealed off from the outside world.

Since the same rumours that allow the desert to embody an ambiguity of knowledge also produce a suspicion of secrecy on the part of the Algerian state, the topography and texture of the Saharan desert becomes significant in their tainting this material residue of secret actions. Because the terrain only offers up public traces of the

hostage-takers' and Algeria's actions that fails to clarify what took place, and because the landscape appears to shape the physical appearance of those traces, that terrain is alluded to as possibly contributing to Algeria's secrecy. This intimation remains only a possibility because of the signified difficulty in proving or disproving claims about the siege. Yet that ambiguity is precisely what allows for this allusion, since the rumours of what took place associate a lack of definite knowledge with the surrounding terrain. This material residue and its tainting by sand is represented as suggestive but equivocal. As with representations of rural lynchings, this coverage makes violence meaningful through the natural landscape which surrounds and conjoins traces of that violence. Newsreaders are prompted by this sparse residue to consider the suggestiveness of the landscape more than anything else.

The manhunt for Mokhtar Belmokhtar

Within hours of news of the hostage-taking at the Tigantourine plant, it was announced that a manhunt for its suspected mastermind had begun, and with that coverage turned to discursively constructing the man known as Mokhtar Belmokhtar. Through rumours of his activities throughout the years, he was represented as intangible, and as having unclear public markers: he was “*apparently...* involved in a series of kidnappings in 2003 that captured 32 European tourists”; he had previously been “falsely reported to have been killed in 1999” and subsequently “condemned to death several times by Algerian courts” – the implication being he had evaded these death sentences. Even his involvement in the current hostage-taking remained unverified, since “[i]t was not clear whether Mr. Belmokhtar was at the scene or commanding the operation from afar” (Erlanger and Nossiter, 2013, emphasis added). These representations of Belmokhtar fit a pattern in British and U.S. public discourse since 11 September 2001, whereby

Islamist terrorists and insurgents are represented as ghostly figures able to easily evade detection and disappear into the landscapes where they operate (Prestholdt, 2009; Gusterson, 2012). In the case of Belmokhtar, however, coverage of the manhunt referenced the landscape of the Sahara such that the demonisation of this figure was complicated by allusions to the inscrutability of both Belmokhtar's *and* counter-terrorist agents' actions in the desert. Unlike past counter-insurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan, here both terrorist and counter-terrorists appeared ghostly.

Rumours of Belmokhtar's characteristics were often articulated with reference to the landscape where he was thought to operate. "It may be a while before we can be sure whether Belmokhtar took part", says one piece in the *Independent on Sunday*, "[b]ut, given his reputation as "the uncatchable one", we might guess that the man with more lives than a desert wildcat has lived to fight another day" (Morgan, 2013). Belmokhtar's ability to evade operations to track him down is here implicitly connected to his being familiar with the desert, his being attuned to that landscape like a native species. The same article also raises the issue of how he and his men were able to "cross the thousands of kilometres of open desert between his base in Gao and In Amenas, with up to 100 men and 20 4x4 vehicles, unnoticed by the Algerian army or secret services" (ibid). Rumours and speculation of Belmokhtar's involvement and capabilities are thus connected to the vast desert expanse, figuring this expanse as one where information is difficult to verify and hostage-takers can seemingly carry out their actions with ease.

This implicit connection between the hostage-takers and the landscape shaped early coverage of developing manhunt efforts (eg. Parker and Dunn, 2013; Worth, 2013). More significant than this initial framing, however, was coverage that drew on rumours of various secret actions unfolding in the course of the manhunt. These rumours referenced geographical characteristics of northern Africa, such that the

landscape appeared significant in light of that secrecy, allowing it to intimate the idea of *wider ongoing* covert operations that the landscape was helping to keep hidden.

These unverifiable intimations began as newspapers reported the belief that Belmokhtar and the remainders of his group had retreated to Mali, the site of France's recent Operation Serval to oust Islamist militants from the north of the country. The movements of these and other “Islamist militants now on the run” are described speculatively with reference to the surrounding terrain: these men are “hiding out in their own forbidding landscape, a rugged, rocky expanse in northeastern Mali” representing “one of Africa's harshest and least-known mountain ranges” (Nossiter and Tinti, 2013). *The New York Times* quotes one Malian officer as indicating a lack of information on the militants in a way that similarly signifies geographical inscrutability: “We don't know how many [militants] there are. They have learned *to hide where* the French can't find them”. The number of militants is reported as being “in dispute”, “with estimates varying from a few hundred fighters to a few thousand”. This uncertainty over numbers is linked to militants' “dispers[ing]” and “hiding” in the “vast and complicated” terrain, which resembles a “natural fortress, with innumerable hideouts”. One military official reports that the militants have had years to “build installations” and “modify caves”, but that “the precise locations of their refuges remain a mystery” (ibid, emphasis added). All of these rumours and speculations around militants' movements associate the inability to gain clear knowledge with the geography of northern Mali. This geography contextualises and implicitly represents the inaccessibility and inscrutability expressed by these rumours: not only does the landscape appear to allow the Islamists to regroup and evade detection, but it is represented as reflecting the ambiguity around the Islamists' actions.

At the same time, this coverage propagated rumours of covert French and

African activities which similarly referenced geography. According to the same article, French special forces “are *very likely* already operating in the Adrar des Ifoghas, performing reconnaissance and *perhaps preparing rescue operations* for French hostages believed to be held in the area” (ibid, emphases added). The qualifiers ‘perhaps’ and ‘likely’, along with the note that these are claims by a third party, emphasise that such operations remain unproven while producing a suspicion of covertness. The piece goes on to state that the French have been flying fewer sorties over the region in recent days, “from which I deduce a lack of targets”, says a Western military attaché (ibid). The recourse to inference again highlights the rumour quality of these details. These rumours are contextualised by the above references to geography, such that the latter are implicitly represented as embodying the inscrutability of likely covert action. References to vast expanses of rocky hills implicitly provide the context for these rumours, with the terrain’s impenetrability signifying the difficulty in establishing what is taking place and the absence of public residue. That these rumours are spread by non-state sources and military attachés “not authorised to speak on the record” (ibid) also produces a suspicion of secrecy around French special forces. This secrecy frames descriptions of the landscape as significant, given the lack of public evidence for covert action within them. The absence is consequently intimated as possible, but unprovable, evidence that operations are ongoing but hidden by the inscrutability and inaccessibility of the terrain. Possible covert action is therefore represented as significant in terms of the opaque landscape.

The framing of covert action as significant in terms of suggestively empty landscape continued throughout coverage of the manhunt for Belmokhtar. Another article in the London *Times* explicitly articulated covert agents’ “international manhunt” as “closing in” on Belmokhtar’s location, but accompanying details complicate this

articulation. While the manhunt is said to be “led by French forces and backed by a British spy plane”, the article notes that “[c]overt US operatives *are also on the trail* of Mokhtar Belmokhtar”. Meanwhile, Belmokhtar is “being pursued by Algerian troops from the north”, with Algerian commandos having crossed the border into Mali “on at least two occasions” in their search for him (Haynes et al, 2013, emphasis added).

These statements of different facets of a manhunt are ambiguous: they do not make clear whether all these forces are ‘closing in’ on the same area, whether only one ‘trail’ is being followed. These erratic details appear alongside descriptions of the Adrar des Ifoghas mountains, an “area of desert valleys, mountains and caves” where Belmokhtar “is believed to be” – a rumour that implicitly suggests where these covert agents and troops are themselves now operating. These valleys and mountains are implicitly represented as difficult to decipher, with a North Africa expert speculating that “[w]e may be about to enter the world of drones. The Americans and everyone else will have got their satellites on [the area]” (ibid). The ambiguity of the different claims about the manhunt is contextualised by this idea of the landscape’s own opacity, with the latter overlapping the former. The references to a spy plane and covert operatives, however, also signify ongoing secrecy. As a result, this coverage alludes to the idea of a link between that secrecy and the opacity of the landscape, as explaining the muddled account of what is happening. The idea that knowledge is indefinite in this opaque landscape, however, makes proving or disproving this allusion seem beside the point – it merely affirms that such a role for the landscape is possible.

Intimations from barren desert expanses reached their peak with reports in March that Belmokhtar had been killed by Chadian special forces. Both Belmokhtar’s death and the manhunt that had been searching for him were described through rumour and speculation that implicitly posited an ambiguous field of knowledge in this

regard. While the *MailOnline* explicitly articulated Belmokhtar's death in triumphalist tones, saying the “veteran Al-Qaeda leader[s]... death will be a major blow to Islamist rebels in northern Mali”, it qualified that “[h]e is *believed* to be one of several extremists killed today when Chadian armed forces in northern Mali ‘completely destroyed’ a terrorist base around midday”. This claim of his death is further qualified as being according to a Chadian statement “read on national television” (Hills, 2013, emphasis added). These qualifications signify that this death remains unconfirmed and implicitly emphasise distance between the event and its being reported through news media. These emphases were perpetuated by statements that Belmokhtar's death “was announced on Chadian state television but has not been confirmed by other sources” and that meanwhile France had “declined to comment” on the reported killing of the AQIM leader Abou Zeid in the same area (ibid).

The disavowed quality of these rumours – the fact that the news article disclaims responsibility for their truth – juxtaposes the description of the base as destroyed; together, they signify the lack of public residue of this operation other than rumours that remain unconfirmed. Indeed, the *Daily Mirror*'s report of the attack linked this lack to the uncertainty over whether Belmokhtar had been killed, quoting a French army source as saying “[t]he base is obliterated and so it will be difficult to carry out DNA tests on those killed”. This statement frames identifying Belmokhtar's body as important, further emphasising that claims of his death remain unconfirmed. The same source then says that “[t]he intelligence appears credible but there is no absolute verification” (S. White, 2013). A reported statement from Chad's President in another article echoes this link between a lack of residue and the disavowed quality of rumours in coverage: “We have proof [Belmokhtar] is dead, but we could not film it because he blew himself up”. This statement is juxtaposed with reports of Islamist militants being

able to evade detection and death, fleeing population zones before carrying out “a series of brazen insurgent attacks”. The reports of Belmokhtar's death are therefore implicitly framed as requiring public evidence to be convincing (Starkey and Sage, 2013). Finally, in articulating all this ambiguity around Belmokhtar's death, coverage describes the landscape where French and African forces are operating, “the mountainous Tigargara area” of northern Mali, with the “assault to retake Mali's *vast desert north* from AQIM” having driven the latter “back into the surrounding desert and mountains” (Hills, 2013, emphasis added). The uncertainty suggested by these rumours is thus contextualised within the terrain of Mali's desert where militants are hiding.

The subject-position produced by these representations of rumour and landscape can be elaborated through the photographs that accompany these news reports. One article carried a mugshot-style photograph of Belmokhtar apparently taken from a propaganda video, along with an image of the gas plant near In Amenas and a photograph purporting to be of “the foothills of the Adrar des Ifoghas mountains” (ibid). The mugshot photo signifies Belmokhtar's elusiveness up until this point, implying that visualisation has been thus far restricted to such videos, echoing coverage of Osama bin Laden (see previous chapter). The image of the Tigantourine gas plant, like the images analysed earlier, signifies its uneventfulness, further emphasised by the fact that the unseen events covered in the article occur in a different space and time to the gas plant siege. The image of the Adrar des Ifoghas mountains is similarly figured as uneventful: ostensibly related to a special forces manhunt, it instead shows still, calm and undifferentiated terrain entirely lacking any trace of either terrorists or covert agents (Figure 19).



Figure 19: Reported photograph of “the foothills of the Adrar des Ifoghas mountains” (Hills, 2013).

Significantly, this terrain is both uneventful and unspecified in space and time; framed only as an image of a mountain range, it fails to clarify where and when this covert operation occurred. As a marker of this mountain range, the image signifies the geographical characteristics of this entire area and, implicitly, the absence of public residue of rumoured special forces actions within that area. All that appears available is this undifferentiated terrain. Contextualising the uncertainty around Belmokhtar's death, this emptiness becomes a metaphorical marker of that lack of definite knowledge. When framed by a suspicion of state secrecy, of ongoing covert operations in this area, the undifferentiated barren topography of this image therefore becomes significant in light of the apparent lack of public traces and the consequent ambiguity embodied in this barrenness. This representation thus intimates the unverifiable idea that covert actions are continuing without leaving residue in this landscape. What this leaves uncertain, however, is whether that lack of residue really reflects and confirms state

secrecy, or whether instead it simply reflects the inability of any such residue to endure within this harsh landscape. The extent to which absence indicates the landscape's complicity in secrecy is therefore left unresolved. But since the landscape implicitly embodies the ambiguity of knowledge around French and African operations, the fact that intimations cannot be proven is represented as beside the point. What matters is its possibility within this terrain. The subject-position produced is one focused on the irresolvable ambiguity of an empty landscape.

The uncertainty over whether barrenness indicated secrecy continued as the press reflected on reports of Belmokhtar's death. *The Sunday Times* articulated both Belmokhtar's death and the "international manhunt" for him through rumour, noting that "[t]he *reported killing* of Belmokhtar", now being "check[ed]" by the British Government, "*appeared to be* the culmination of an offensive by French and Chadian troops". These qualifications emphasise the unconfirmed and inferential quality of this information. That this is the culmination of an offensive also signifies a larger military operation, in the course of which "[b]oth French and American forces" are "reported to have joined the hunt for Belmokhtar" (Allen-Mills, 2013, emphases added). These references to an offensive of which Belmokhtar's death 'appeared to be' the culmination, absent any documentation of these actions, hint at the possibility of secrecy.

In articulating these rumours of the operation's success, the article references the area where this offensive is taking place, stating that "[a]ccording to a report in *The New York Times* last Friday, [the French and Chadian troops] were concentrating their efforts on a 15-mile zone in the Adrar des Ifoghas mountains, near the border with Algeria", using a "British spy plane" to "provid[e] realtime images" of this landscape. Belmokhtar himself is described as having "buil[t] a formidable power base in the *mountainous wastelands of the inner Sahara*", while Islamist fighters associated with him

are now “hiding in an especially difficult zone” (ibid, emphasis added). Equivocal rumours of a secretive action against Belmokhtar are thus contextualised by references to barren and inhospitable terrain that itself requires careful scrutiny. These references allow the mountainous wastelands to implicitly embody the equivocal nature of reported actions, while also implicitly signifying the lack of a publicly-visible trace of this Chadian special forces operation, or indeed of any such actions as part of a U.S.-French manhunt.

The metaphorically opaque landscape is itself framed by the suspicion of secrecy that surrounds the manhunt, making that landscape appear significant in its reflecting a lack of clear public residue. This framing intimates the possibility that covert operations are ongoing in the region but that any trace is successfully being hidden by the terrain of this 'difficult zone'. Once again, the natural landscape contextualises and 'taints' unseen violence: the apparent lack of material trace, reflected in this terrain, becomes the meaningful context for the violence, defining the latter by what this lack might suggest about the role of the landscape. But because rumours of Belmokhtar's death posit an ambiguous field of knowledge around the manhunt, this meaning is qualified as remaining neither proved nor disproved. The natural landscape comes to embody that ambiguity of knowledge and signifies that it cannot be known whether the absence of public traces reflects state secrecy, or simply the natural consequences of barren and inhospitable terrain.

Coverage of the manhunt for Mokhtar Belmokhtar therefore continually alluded to the idea of the landscape's complicity in a wide degree of state secrecy, while also emphasising that the confirmed truth of this notion was less important than its mere possibility. The subject-position produced by these representations focused on that possibility, on the irresolvable suggestiveness of the topography and terrain.

Conclusion: barrenness or secrecy?

It did not take long for rumours of Islamist terrorist activity in the Sahara-Sahel to quash reports of Belmokhtar's death: two months after the Chadian operation, simultaneous attacks on an army base and a French-owned uranium mine in Niger were claimed to be the work of Belmokhtar. The significance of this fact was not lost on journalists, with these bombings characterised as “the latest suggestion that Belmokhtar is alive, after the Chadian army claimed in March it had killed him in a raid” (Hirsch, 2013). The attacks themselves were represented through inferential rumour, with a security expert in Niger claiming “[t]here is evidence from the vehicles that the attackers were using and the way that they were able to plan and co-ordinate these attacks that they had inside help” (ibid). Having noted “[c]onfusion” caused by “conflicting claims” about the numbers of attackers and casualties, the article states that the French defence minister has “confirmed... that French special forces had intervened in the aftermath of the attack at Agadez, killing two of the attackers”. These forces are “believed to have been stationed in the area since 2010” (ibid). While detail on the bombers is articulated as ambiguous, and a previous counter-terrorism success is revealed as illusory, this report hints at ongoing military-intelligence action outside the public sphere.

It is this representational dynamic of suggestiveness and unknowability that has structured coverage of kidnappings and rescue attempts, hostage-takings and manhunts, in the Sahara-Sahel. Having analysed representations that rely on material traces of covert counter-terrorism in the case of drone strikes, and those that draw on the acknowledged secretion of targeted bodies in the case of the bin Laden raid, this chapter has examined counter-terrorism cases where such traces and confirmations of secretion are much sparser and more circumspect. The operations carried out in response to

kidnappings in this region have most frequently been represented through rumour and speculation, ambiguous claims of unclear provenance and inference from past operations. The challenge that these representations posed for this thesis was whether such seemingly insubstantial and indefinite residue of covert operations could be producing intimations that were shaping the meaning and significance of these operations.

The key to examining whether such intimations were being produced was the representational dynamic taking place between three elements: rumour, landscape and secrecy. Rumours of rescue attempts and manhunts implicitly posited an ambiguous field of knowledge, giving the impression that proving or disproving particular claims was difficult to the point of being pointless. Alongside this ambiguity were descriptions of the landscape where these rumoured operations took place. Geographical qualities of vast expanses, barren terrain and undifferentiated topography, alongside description of the material texture of desert sand, were used by journalists to give these sparse reports depth and context. In contextualising rumours of unseen events that left behind little residue, these geographical characteristics implicitly signify that absence, and consequent ambiguity of knowledge, by metaphorically embodying them. As with representations of rural lynchings, the natural landscape delimited the represented socio-political context of the violence.

In this case, the vast undifferentiated barrenness of the Saharan and Sahelian terrain discursively 'tainted' rumours of ongoing covert operations, signifying that knowledge *in these places* was ambiguous, that these geographical qualities and the absence of residue at their centre *reflected* that intangibility of provable knowledge. Finally, non-state rumours of rescue efforts or manhunts juxtaposed these descriptions of unremarkable, undifferentiated topography to signify a mere suspicion of secrecy, a

suspicion that these rumoured actions were secrets being kept by different states inside and outside the region. As previously argued, this suspicion of secrecy has the ability to make the residue of covert counter-terrorism suggestive, by figuring that residue as public remainders of an otherwise-secreted operation, which in turn emphasises ambiguities and lacunae within that residue. In the case of Sahara-Sahel operations, this suspected secrecy also emphasises an absence, one signified not by traces themselves but by public geographical qualities of barrenness, homogeneity and vast distances, qualities which secrecy frames as significant precisely in their lacking clear markers of these operations.

With this absence of residue in an unremarkable landscape made suggestive, these representations were able to intimate the idea that this inscrutable landscape was 'complicit' in obscuring or tainting any public traces of covert counter-terrorism. Like representations of rural lynchings a century earlier, the landscape was figured as embodying the violence and its characteristics, in this case its intangibility. The absence of traces within the landscape was made suggestive. At the same time, however, because these covert actions were reported through rumour – rumour that implied an ambiguous field of knowledge – this suggestiveness was itself intimated as unverifiable. As a result, intimations left unclear whether the lack of residue on the surface of the landscape reflected state secrecy or simply the natural and normal condition of this surface, its unremarkable barrenness. Secrecy, and the landscape's role in it, remains unresolved. These intimations therefore made rescue attempts and manhunts meaningful in terms of the ambiguity of that lack identified in these landscapes. Landscape became the meaningful context of these events, but it remained unclear whether the absence of residue within it revealed anything at all.

The subject-positions produced as a result of this give further support to the

proposed historical affiliation between contemporary covert counter-terrorism and lynching in the United States. Despite their wildly contrasting motives and methods, just as lynchings by the early twentieth century had become more subterranean practices increasingly learned of nationally through rumour and speculation (Rushdy, 2012: 97-107, 129-36), so covert operations in the Sahara-Sahel have been represented internationally in the same way. As discussed, national representations of lynching portrayed the practice as one whose violence was difficult to comprehend in relation to modern society, focusing attention on how to understand it in that context, and shaping a public subject-position on those terms. In the case of drone strikes, this subject-position of worried impotence, to echo Goldsby (2006: 148), revolves around the seeming ephemerality of strikes, their being too fleeting in-and-of-themselves to be scrutinised and managed in a democratic polity. With the raid on Osama bin Laden's compound, that subject-position was defined by suspicion over what bin Laden's secreted body might reveal about the operation and those who conducted it.

In the case of Sahara-Sahel operations, the difficulty in comprehension revolves around the idea that definite knowledge in this vast landscape is unattainable – that all one can say for certain is that the presence and activities of covert operatives across this region is possible. Articulated through rumours that posit ambiguity within this geographical region, these representations signify that “no-one's knowledge can be greater than anyone else's” here, and that therefore “the possibility that a story is true is just as likely as that it is false” (Donovan, 2007: 77). Witnesses of these rumours are thus invited to focus on the suggestive ambiguity of the absence at the centre of the portrayed terrain. Being defined by this absence, the natural landscape is made meaningful in its embodying the intangibility of covert violence: qualities of the landscape signify that intangibility, and the unverifiable knowledge produced therein.

Assent towards state violence is not produced by these representations, but neither is dissent. Rather, this coverage represents covert action as important in terms of the inability to determine what has happened, and unprovable possibilities that circulate in its wake. Like rural lynchings a century earlier, these operations are implicitly defined by, and embodied within, their natural surroundings. That this covert violence has a socio-political, not just natural, context, and deserves ethical consideration on that basis, is marginalised from the represented significance of these events.

Conclusion

Resistance and recovery in the debris

The residue piles up: rendition and detention

In December 2014, a report by the U.S. Senate intelligence committee thrust covert action into the spotlight once again. The report was a list of findings and an executive summary of the long-running investigation into the CIA's detention and interrogation of terrorist suspects at black sites throughout the world (Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2014). The report detailed the so-called enhanced interrogation techniques used against around one hundred detainees held between 2001 and 2009 and heavily critiqued the CIA's own claim that these techniques were invaluable for acquiring information on future terrorist attacks.

Behind the damning assessments of the CIA's techniques and truthfulness, the Senate report effectively produced new public traces of this covert CIA programme, traces which perpetuated state secrecy in the public sphere. The report was regularly framed as having confirmed and detailed the use of “secret CIA torture practices conducted over seven years at hidden sites around the world” (McCarthy, 2014). Those secret or 'black' sites were listed as being in Cuba, Iraq, Lithuania, Thailand, Romania, Afghanistan and Poland. Yet the report itself made no mention of these countries. As the *Washington Post* noted, the public version of the Senate report “refers to the agency's post-Sept. 11 “black sites” as color-themed codes” (Goldman and Tate, 2014). The names of the states housing these secret prisons were left out of the report presented to Senate intelligence committee members, replaced with unique letters. These identification codes were then redacted by the Obama administration prior to publication of the

report's summary (Black, 2015; Figure 20). The result is a report summary where codes obscuring the names of states are *themselves* obscured.

2. The CIA Establishes DETENTION SITE BLACK in Country [REDACTED] and DETENTION SITE VIOLET in Country [REDACTED]

(TS// [REDACTED]//NF) The CIA entered into an agreement with the [REDACTED] in Country [REDACTED] to host a CIA detention facility in [REDACTED] 2002.⁵⁶¹ In [REDACTED] 2003, CIA Headquarters invited the CIA Station in Country [REDACTED] to identify ways to support the [REDACTED] in Country [REDACTED] to “demonstrate to [REDACTED] and the highest levels of the [Country [REDACTED]] government that we deeply appreciate their cooperation and support” for the detention program.⁵⁶² The Station responded with an \$[REDACTED] million “wish list” [REDACTED].⁵⁶³ CIA Headquarters provided the Station with \$[REDACTED] million more than was requested for the purposes of the [REDACTED] subsidy.⁵⁶⁴ CIA detainees were transferred to DETENTION SITE BLACK in Country [REDACTED] in the fall of 2003.⁵⁶⁵

Figure 20: Extract from Senate intelligence committee study of CIA rendition and detention, showing redaction of country codes (Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2014: 97).

The redaction of codes which obscure information anyway seems like an absurdity, a secretion *of* secretion that only further signifies that secrecy. Equally significant, however, is that these states were still repeatedly named in news coverage. State hosts of black sites were not explicitly identified by the report summary but by journalists' efforts at 'decoding', in the *Post*'s words, “[o]ther details in the report” (Goldman and Tate, 2014). For instance, the *Associated Press* pointed to unredacted details in the public summary that indicated Poland was the host of one of the CIA secret prisons from 2002 to 2003 (*Associated Press*, 2015). The *Bureau of Investigative Journalism* correlated information on the transfer dates of detainees with publicly-available flight path data to identify the black site coded 'Violet' as residing in Lithuania (Black, 2015). Different seemingly-unrelated or innocuous details were thus translated by journalists into new residue: for instance, both *The Washington Post* and *The Intercept* produced maps pinpointing the colour-coded prisons where this covert programme had

taken place (Goldman and Tate, 2014; Tate, 2014). Through this correlation and collation, different details of CIA detention were represented as public residue of those black sites whose locations had been redacted. These details were represented as significant in having passed through the net of secretion, existing in the public sphere and allowing for speculation on where covert action had occurred.

The residue of the CIA detention programme neither started nor ended with this Senate report. In 2009, *ABC News* claimed to have identified a former horse riding academy building in Lithuania as having been bought by the CIA in 2004 and used as a secret prison. The report cited “sources who saw the facility” who described the facility's interior, while flight logs appeared to confirm that “CIA planes made repeated flights into Lithuania” until the prison was closed in November 2005 and the prisoners moved to 'warzone sites' in the Middle East (Cole and Ross, 2009). The U.S. Senate report would later cite internal CIA records showing that the intelligence agency had decided to expand the then-incomplete 'Violet' black site in mid-2003, “given the growing number of CIA detainees”, with the facility remaining open until 2006 (Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2014: 98). A 2009 Lithuanian parliamentary report identifies two different black sites in Lithuania: 'Project No. 1', which appeared to be the site identified by *ABC News*, and 'Project No. 2' in a different village, with both built in collaboration with Lithuania's State Security Department. In the case of the second newer Project, the report cited “the layout of the building, its enclosed nature and protection of the perimeter” as having allowed the CIA to carry out actions unmonitored. The “real purpose” of 'Project No. 2', according to a subsequent Lithuanian prosecutors' office investigation, “may not be revealed as it constitutes a state secret” (quoted in Black, 2015).

This refusal has not stopped residue of this black site appearing in the public

sphere. A report from the *Bureau of Investigative Journalism* identifies a “windowless white warehouse about the size of an Olympic swimming pool” as having been constructed in 2004 and “soon bec[oming] a topic of gossip among the 750 inhabitants of Antaviliai, a small hamlet ten miles north of the Lithuanian capital and encircled by pine forest” (ibid). The report cites anonymous villagers as having watched the site constructed at night “using brand new equipment that was out of place among the tumbledown factory buildings, allotments and unpretentious Communist-era housing blocks”. Villagers also saw “English-speaking security guards” patrol the site perimeter, “vehicles with tinted windows” driving in and out of the base and regular visits from the van of a local restaurant (ibid). The *Bureau* report is accompanied by a photograph of the alleged black site, an anonymous low-rise building surrounded by tall pines and fencing, which separate the photographer from the site (Figure 21). The context provided by the article suggests that this is a photograph of the facility after the CIA's programme has allegedly been discontinued – that is, the photo is framed as residue of covert activities that have passed unseen, except in peripheral glimpses by villagers.



Figure 21: Alleged site of CIA secret prison in Antaviliai, Lithuania (Black, 2015).

The details provided by villagers do not rest easily with statements from the Lithuanian prosecutors' office that the site was not being used to hold prisoners. Those snatched glimpses of possible covert action, meanwhile, are not acknowledged by the state alleged to have carried it out, producing a suspicion of secrecy around the site. The details relayed by Antaviliai residents are not usually dwelt upon in scholarly discussion of the public representation of the CIA detention programme (see chapter four). Rather than provide a glimpse of the enactment of torture carried out at these facilities, these public traces constitute residue, traces which signify that covert activities have passed *unseen* in many parts of the world beyond glimpsed occurrences at Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. A suspicion of secrecy frames villagers' statements, and their contradicting other claims about what happened in Lithuania, as significant. This allows these statements to intimate unverifiable ideas about the wider logistics and

infrastructure of maintaining these black sites – the apparent need to import new materials to house detainees, the possible feeding of guards and prisoners at the facility and the implicit contrast between these more banal aspects of black site operations and other known details of detainees' (mal)treatment at such sites. These traces therefore implicitly represent the rendition and detention programme in ways that exceed a focus on the extremities of the practice, as thought to be shaped by photographs of detainees and torture.

The photograph of the warehouse is particularly interesting in that it appears unremarkable and unenlightening of any past covert activities. When framed as a former CIA site, however, the aesthetic composition of the photograph produces a suspicion of state secrecy, with the photographer's distance emphasising the inability to access and document the site's interior. This secrecy implicitly highlights that which the photographic residue of the facility cannot verify, the myriad contextualising details of the CIA's struggle to secure sites for their secret prisons and of what went on there. The photograph becomes defined by its ambiguity: it is unclear what exactly is being shown here, what exactly the photograph might reveal about detention practices in Lithuania and elsewhere. Even its temporal significance is rendered ambiguous: the suspicion of secrecy highlights both the uneventfulness of the site and the absence of any markers of those detained there; this framing emphasises the inability to confirm how – even if – covert rendition practices which appear to have left few public traces *ended* here.

This ambiguity as emphasised by secrecy allows the image of the facility to produce excess meaning: specifically, suspicions of a wider infrastructure and set of unseen practices involved in rendition, detention and interrogation that relied upon unremarkable and inconspicuous places. The suspicion of secrecy frames the apparent banality of the image of the warehouse to intimate the unverifiable idea that such

nondescript sites were precisely what the CIA wanted and required to carry out its covert activities. Indeed, the uneventfulness of the site is framed by secrecy as suggestive: the possibility of rendition and detention taking place here without drawing wide attention intimates the unverifiable idea that such practices could be continuing in similar nondescript sites elsewhere – or even that witnesses do not know the full story about the apparent ending of the practice here. The inconspicuousness of the warehouse intimates the journalistic effort required to link it to the rendition programme, and therefore the precarity of that link – perhaps, it alludes, other sites have not yet been identified in this way. Once again, the extremities of the torture itself does not dominate the meaning of the covert operation because the bodies of those tortured do not take up the representational frame. Instead, the non-bodily residue of the Antaviliai site is made suggestive by secrecy, focusing attention on questions over where these black sites were located and why those locations were chosen. The issue of space, and particularly how anonymous space has perhaps contributed to largely unseen CIA practices in this and other states, becomes the focus.

The covert practice of rendition, then, is constructed and framed rather differently when this residue circulates in public discourse. Witnesses are not prompted by these representations to think they are witnessing and responding to visible suffering – bodies are conspicuous in their absence. As such, witnesses are not prompted to think they are having an imagined response to “what the other [the suffering subject] is presumed to be feeling” (Adelman and Kozol, 2014). But witnesses are nonetheless positioned by these representations in relation to the U.S. and other states involved in rendition and detention, and to unknown detainees at sites such as these. Those political subjects, and ideas about their characteristics, are intimated in their absence. These public traces are not some idle addendum to the already-told story of rendition; they

produce excess meaning and so *reshape* that story, including the positioning of a presumed public readership towards these covert events.

The reason this Conclusion begins with a discussion of rendition and detention – a practice that on the face of it belongs to a different category of covert action than those covered in this thesis – is that these newly-uncovered traces sharpen what is at stake in representations of covert action residue. Scholarly discussion of state practices at so-called black sites has revolved around particular representations of these activities and the ethical challenge they are seen to pose. These representations are the photographs of prisoners in orange jumpsuits patrolled by imposing soldiers, and of prisoners physically abused by prison guards for the camera's eye. Scholarship has asked what it means to view these photographs, to witness suffering bodies juxtaposed with soldiers in control (see chapter four). The persistent concern expressed is that when visualised, these bodies are marked visually and textually by the U.S. state as dangerous, or are visualised by their torturers as sexually repressed and depraved on account of their race, such that they appear to confirm the overlapping metonymic identities of 'terrorist' and 'Muslim male' through their appearance and behaviour. They become evidence of 'what Muslims and terrorists are like'. The powerless and violated qualities of these bodies are therefore thought to signify the downtrodden position of these metonymic identities, and to interpellate that position for those similarly racialised, and prompt feelings of cultural superiority or even enjoyment on the part of others (Van Veeren, 2011: 1730-7; Pugliese, 2007: 253-61). The violence becomes intelligible as inevitable, as incontestable. The analytic of this scholarship, then, has focused on the potential for witnesses to become *complicit* in discursive violence, in the demonisation and dehumanisation of detainees.

The residue discussed above does not reiterate this dilemma. Indeed, what makes these non-bodily traces of rendition and black sites significant is that they do *not* afford a glimpse of suffering, and as such they do not pose the challenge of what it means to witness that suffering. As this thesis has argued, covert counter-terrorism can be represented in ways that signify the *absence* of sufferers, and therefore curtail any 'recognition' of their suffering subjectivities and understanding of that suffering as ethically meaningful on those terms. Surrounded by a suspicion of secrecy, the traces of rendition discussed above signify that the bodies of those rendered, detained and then abused inside these black sites are absent from the public sphere. Indeed, the residue of these sites leaves unclear to whom if anyone they relate – it is unclear whether this residue should be understood as being of specific renditions of particular persons, and who those persons would be. Instead of detainees' suffering, this residue hints at a wider infrastructure of state violence, the existence and unverifiable characteristics of an apparatus supporting these black sites. Far from being a spectacle of corporeality, this residue alludes to invisible structures which supported and maintained that violence.

This meaning-making hints at a final crucial part of the historical affiliation between covert counter-terrorism and lynching, setting the basis for this Conclusion. By circulating in public discourse and shaping the representation of black sites, this residue of buildings and distanced eyewitnesses avoids defining the practice through the extremities of its violence. Those extremities, the spectacle of subordination and wounding on detainee bodies, are instead contextualised by intimations of the wider infrastructure of the practice. With this residue circulating alongside more bodily documentation, they have the potential to deprive the latter of its status as an iconic glimpse of the practice, a representation that 'stands in' for the unseen whole and signifies that it contains the meaning of the practice despite revealing only one part of it.

(Bhattacharyya, 2008: 58). The residue discussed above works against this dynamic by alluding to a larger array of social practices that help constitute black site operations but which remain unseen. This residue does not *replace* broken bodies as an iconic glimpse of rendition; rather, it signifies the *absences* left in the place of such a glimpse.

Lynching has entered contemporary popular culture through its extremities: visual portrayals which focus on the limp hanging bodies of those lynched while showing the mob and spectating crowd surrounding those bodies. The practice has been conceptualised within this aesthetic arrangement: the spatial scene and temporal moment of that hanging and spectating is what constitutes lynching for most analyses. But the conceptualisation of lynching through the extremities of the violence was a contested act during the first half of the twentieth century. Not all social commentators and political activists took it as given that lynching was simply defined by spectacles of the mutilated hanged body and the mob (Rushdy, 2012: 97-100). Observers and anti-lynching organisers saw this presumption as having a crucial consequence for national understandings of lynching and its weaving into narratives of U.S. history, one that would shape how this and subsequent violence against racial minorities would be made meaningful in public discourse. In other words, the conceptualisation of lynching through its extremities would shape the potential for ethical responsiveness.

The historical affiliation between lynching and covert counter-terrorism therefore points to how the political dynamics of violence can depend upon the distinction between its extremities and its seemingly more arbitrary remainders. Both practices exist and circulate within a representational economy, to repeat the adaptation of Campbell's (2007) term, where this distinction shapes the meanings ascribed to them. Yet the question of ethical responsiveness has nearly always been answered narrowly in terms of responding to the extremities, of witnessing the wounded body and the

experience it expresses. This Conclusion therefore examines what this distinction might suggest about the potential for ethically responding to the residue discussed throughout the thesis, the non-bodily traces of unseen violence. As discussed in the Introduction, the literature on both state secrecy and war representations consistently maintain that an ethical response to state violence requires a recognition of the suffering subjectivities of those violated. Framed within the above distinction, this position argues that ethical witnessing requires access to the extremities of violence, the suffering person whose experience is communicated through its embodiment, which allows witnesses to acknowledge its ethical significance through an affective response. From this perspective, the arbitrary remainders discussed throughout this thesis are just that: inconsequential left-overs of a practice that must be sensorily accessed elsewhere, by other means, for ethical witnessing to be possible. The secrecy of these counter-terrorism programmes is once again posed as an impediment, this time to ethics.

But rather than seek out the extremes, what happens if we stay with the residue of covert counter-terrorism and consider what ethical responsiveness might mean in relation to non-bodily traces of unseen violence? This Conclusion argues that, just as with lynching in the early and mid-twentieth century, an analytical focus on the extremities of a violent practice can obscure its broader political dynamics, including the representational practices that make it and related violence possible. Switching focus to residue opens the possibility for an ethical response defined by self-awareness, an awareness of how witnesses help shape the meaning of violence in ways that are obscured by that violence's definition through its extremities as distanced and disconnected from wider society.

Having framed covert action residue in terms of a focus away from the extremities, the Conclusion asks how an ethical response of self-awareness could be

produced, given that the thesis has demonstrated how representations of residue produce narrow ethical orientations. In answering this question, it is determined that the ethical witnessing of contemporary covert counter-terrorism cannot be about retrieving knowledge of suffering from that residue. That suffering is signified *as absent*; searching for it in order to 'recognise' others' subjectivities risks compounding the representation of covert counter-terrorism as intangible and disconnected from those left with its remainders. The scholarly desire to determine the possibility for such recognition betrays an understanding of ethical witnessing as a way of resisting state discourses that determine the meaning of state violence. This begs the question, since as shown throughout the thesis those discourses are usually present only in the abstract and are undermined by intimations from residue, which hint at possibilities that represent the terms of those rationalisations as invalid. In the case of covert counter-terrorism, ethics cannot be about presuming the hegemonic of state frames of meaning. The key to ethical witnessing as self-awareness is a prompting of witnesses to consider how residue positions them as distanced and disconnected from covert violence, and how this production of distance shapes the (in)significance afforded absences. Placing covert action in an historical affiliation with lynching, on the basis of a shared dynamic of absence and distancing, is not just as an analytical tool but a normative one, a way to shape this particular form of ethical responsiveness towards unseen violence.

In order to contextualise this argument, the Conclusion begins by summarising the theory and analyses of the previous chapters.

Secrecy, absence, and the rationalisation of state violence

This thesis began with the question of what it means to witness state violence that is

designed to be covert. While the literature on war and media frames the witnessing of war as a matter of whether one is able to 'recognise' suffering – that is, to have an affective response to a person's experience of suffering through a representation, and through that response be prompted to accord that person's experience ethical significance – representations of contemporary covert counter-terrorism do not fit this analytic. These representations neither provide nor efface markers of sufferers' subjectivities, but offer only non-bodily traces of state violence. Rather than presume that the question of ethical responsiveness is therefore moot, the Introduction expressed scepticism regarding this definition of ethical witnessing: the act of recognising subjectivity is shaped by socio-cultural discourses of what counts as a marker of subjectivity, and demands that beings therefore express the 'right' marker in order to spark ethical consideration. Moreover, this definition of responsiveness ignores how even when recognisability is curtailed, representations can shape ethical orientations *towards absence* – that is, they can prompt witnesses to think and feel certain things towards the absence of certain people, and by extension towards those absentees. Ethical witnessing of today's covert counter-terrorism is a matter of how those absences are made intelligible and given significance.

The Introduction further noted that this misunderstanding of absence was shared by the literature on covert action, which has aimed to detail the implementation and operational results of such activities, and as such has chased the hidden file, the state archives that would provide these details. This analytic positions the secrecy surrounding covert action as an impediment to analysis, in that it produces absences in the public record that act as barriers to knowledge. This neglects how covert operations breach those archives and enter the public sphere, both through their enactment and in the traces they leave behind, and insodoing *represent* secrecy within public discourse.

The thesis has therefore aimed to stay with the secret as secret and to resist filling in the absences – to explore how secrecy and absence materialise in the public sphere as recognisable, because signified, through these public traces.

The importance of this public existence of secrecy and absence is that it affects what it means to witness covert violence and to ethically respond to it. For if ethical witnessing need not involve the recognition of subjectivities, and if secrecy and absence can be signified by traces of violence rather than by the state itself, what would it therefore take for representations of these traces to rationalise covert violence, to prompt assent towards the use of force? Rationalisation is premised upon the reiteration of a public narrative that pre-conditions the meaning of representations of state violence, such that those representations appear to echo the terms within that narrative. Where such echoing prompts witnesses to understand sufferers in demonised or dehumanised ways, curtailing recognition of their suffering as having ethical import, the violence in question is rationalised. But non-bodily traces of covert action, and the secrecy and absence they materialise, need not echo any such narrative for covert violence, particularly if the state rarely acknowledges those traces and does not articulate a narrative which rationalises the possible use of secrecy. The conceptual challenge presented by these traces is one of ethical orientations towards state violence that go beyond rationalisation and its putative opposite 'resistance', that exceed a binary of assent and dissent; if the state does not address its use of covertness to the public and rationalise that use, talk of resisting that rationalisation is specious. Again, the issue is how *absences* in the public sphere, not 'recognisable' experiences of suffering, are made meaningful and prompt witnesses to respond to them.

With this analytical focus, the thesis moved on to conceptualise both secrecy and absence as *part of*, rather than curtailing, representational dynamics. The first chapter

found that past theorisations of the secrecy surrounding covert action have presumed that such secrecy becomes part of public representations thanks to two things: articulations from the state and glimpses of covert violence. Conceptualising secrecy as a state instrument for shaping public discourse, and that glimpses of covert operations align the witness' perspective with that of the perpetrators of violence, this literature has theorised that secrecy, as articulated by the state, rationalises the use of covertness related to these glimpses and therefore prompts assent towards covert violence. Representations of contemporary covert counter-terrorism do not fit this model of secrecy: they involve neither invocations of secrecy by the state nor glimpses of covert agents in action. These representations instead suggest that secrecy can be signified as a mere suspicion, through the rumours and debris left in the public sphere by such operations, and that this need not involve the articulation of an accompanying rationale. Such suspected secrecy can prompt witnesses of these traces to consider questions about the use of covertness and the state's covert power, questions raised by the absence of any rationalisation of secrecy. The representational dynamics of secrecy need not be instigated or determined by the state.

Just as secrecy can materialise through representational practices, so too can absence be represented and thus 'made present' to witnesses. The second chapter used a comparative example of two representations with similar aesthetics qualities, one of an Israeli airstrike on Gaza, the other of a drone attack in Yemen, to demonstrate how secrecy and absence can materialise through that left in the wake of an unseen state action, and can then implicitly signify possibilities about what happened that undermine any rationalisation of that violence. These significations turn representations of covert action's traces from enigmatic to suggestive. The chapter conceptualised the rumours, speculation, snippets of information, debris and smoke left in the public sphere as

residue, that which signifies a covert action has passed unseen, and theorised these significations of unverifiable possibilities as intimations from absence. These intimations are produced because the suspicion of secrecy that is produced by residue frames that residue as significant in that it has been left in the public sphere and not been secreted by the state. Residue is thereby represented as possibly revealing things which covertness would have otherwise obscured. This framing incorporates the equivocal absences in this residue, ambiguities around that which is absent from these representations and by extension the public sphere. Being equivocal but framed by secrecy as significant, these absences allude to unverifiable possibilities as to what they might suggest about the unseen event.

The second chapter therefore demonstrated that these intimations curtail the rationalisation of covert violence, by preventing residue from echoing the terms of that rationalisation and implicitly challenging the validity of that rationalisation in the case of these unseen events. This does not mean, however, that these intimations prompt ethical responsiveness towards these events and dissent towards their state perpetrator; this is a matter of how witnesses are positioned by intimations towards the unseen violence and its absent casualties. To understand the representational consequences of that which is left unspoken on that which is absent, the chapter conceptualised an historical affiliation between covert counter-terrorism and lynching. Affiliation, developed from narrative strategies in the prose fiction of W.G. Sebald, involves the association of disparate violent events based not on the violence itself but representational echoes in their aftermath. In the case of covert action and lynching, this affiliation derived from traces that shared an absence of violated bodies, which in both cases figures the unseen violence as distanced from wider society. Historical affiliation was conceptualised as a way to analyse whether dynamics identified in one set of

representations were present but obscured in the other set. The juxtaposition of representations of contrasting violence can reveal whether that which is absent is nonetheless represented and given significance in a way which goes unnoticed in one case, because implicit, but which is more explicitly articulated in another. The affiliation with lynching was therefore designed to examine any implicit or intimated ethical orientations towards absent violence and casualties produced by residue of that violence.

Having laid this theoretical groundwork, the thesis analysed three empirical cases where contemporary covert counter-terrorism is represented through its residue. The first of these was that of the covert drone strike programmes in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia. The third chapter began by examining the past critical scholarship on the drone programmes, finding that this scholarship conceptualises drone warfare from within the visualisation methods, operating procedures and materials that are used to prosecute strikes. This again frames secrecy as a barrier to research, while neglecting how the public event of strikes, their narration through their public traces, might materialise spaces and identities in the world that do not match the internal rationalisation of drone violence through its operationalisation. By examining representations of drone strike residue, from snippets of targeting mechanisms to material debris, in press and social media coverage, the chapter argued that this residue signifies a suspicion of secrecy such that the absence of casualties within this residue becomes suggestive. This residue thus intimates possibilities that casualties' identities are being kept hidden or cannot be confirmed, that secluded spaces help to obscure information, and that targeting mechanisms are fallible or flawed. While undermining the U.S. state's abstracted rationalisation of 'targeted killing', these intimations implicitly represent unseen strikes as too ephemeral, too fleeting in space and time and too

materially insubstantial in their public footprint to be understood. These intimations produce an ethical orientation similar to those of past lynching representations, which explicitly articulated the practice as discomforting in that it rubbed against wider societal progress and was therefore confounding in its causes and implications. In both cases, this shapes an ethical orientation towards unseen violence that focused on the struggle to comprehend its dynamics, marginalising absent casualties as relevant only in indicating that which causes this struggle – in the case of covert strikes, the intangibility of this practice.

Not all covert counter-terrorism goes unremarked by the state in the same way. The fourth chapter used the case of the raid on Osama bin Laden's Abbottabad compound to examine a covert action where both the operation and some of its secrecy *was* acknowledged and rationalised by the U.S. – the acknowledged secrecy being not the covertness of the action itself, but the hiding of bin Laden's mortally wounded body. While previous scholarship has asserted a parallel between the visualisation of detainees at Abu Ghraib prison and photography practices around lynching a century earlier, this chapter used the Abbottabad case to reframe the association between counter-terrorism and lynching, basing it not on visualisation but on secretion. Lynching photography was rarely publicised nationally, being disseminated mainly among locals sympathetic to the practice. The secretion of that documentation, rather than its visual composition, was the source of its representational power, as rumours and speculation in lieu of those documents could reiterate understandings of who had the power to see and define the meaning of these violated bodies. That power, however, relied on that act of secretion itself not being re-contextualised as an attempt to curtail other possible readings of the body; such a representation could undermine the power of secrecy by highlighting its discursive labour and hinting at those potential readings.

The chapter argued that this was precisely the representational dynamic that took place in news coverage of the bin Laden raid. By hiding documentation of bin Laden's body but then justifying this as an attempt to avoid negative connotations, rather than leaving secretion unacknowledged, U.S. officials allowed the act of hiding to circulate alongside other residue of the raid – from rumours of what took place to the material marks left at the compound – which was either released officially or was not similarly addressed by the state. Framed as public evidence of a covert event, this other residue reframed the act of hiding bin Laden's corpse, by signifying ambiguities and contradictions regarding the actions of absent bodies, namely bin Laden and the Navy SEALs who conducted the raid. These absences intimated the possibility that these absent bodies did not fit the role assigned to them by the U.S. narrative of the raid as a U.S. triumph over a cowardly and hypocritical terrorist threat. These intimations implicitly represented the hiding of bin Laden's body and documentation of the raid as an attempt to cover up any such incongruities in the official story; by highlighting that discursive labour, and the possibilities suggested by these incongruities, these intimations undermined the official rationalisation of the raid and the accompanying identity schema. But again, the ethical orientation produced by these intimations was neither assent nor dissent towards the violence of the raid; rather, it was one focused on considering what the hiding of the body might imply about proclaimed high ideals of the U.S. in carrying out the raid, and how secrecy might be preventing understanding of these implications. The subject-position produced was therefore self-absorbed.

In the fifth chapter, the thesis turned to a case of covert counter-terrorism which has, by contrast, produced very little in the way of residue. Efforts to rescue those kidnapped by terrorist affiliates in the Sahara and Sahel, and the manhunt for Mokhtar Belmokhtar across this region, has been represented primarily through rumours of

unclear provenance and speculation inferred from past events. These details are articulated in news coverage such that they imply an ambiguous field of knowledge, that truth is difficult to establish. At the same time, these rumours have been contextualised by references to the Sahara-Sahel landscape in terms of vast, barren and undifferentiated terrain, and in terms of the materiality of the Saharan desert. These characteristics take on a metaphorical role in this coverage, juxtaposing rumours of operations such that they appear to confirm and reflect the ambiguity of knowledge. Finally, absences and contradictions highlighted by different claims and rumours around these operations produced a suspicion of secrecy, related to states both inside and outside the region.

The fifth chapter argued that this interaction of rumour, landscape and secrecy shaped representational dynamics that could again be illuminated through an historical affiliation with lynching. As within representations of rural lynchings a century earlier, rumoured rescues and manhunts gained meaning through the surrounding landscape. With rumours of operations framed by descriptions of terrain, and sparse debris 'tainted' by desert sand, the socio-political context of the violence was delimited to this natural landscape. As with rural lynchings, the landscape was in turn made meaningful through this violence: the barren homogeneity of the Sahara-Sahel landscape was represented as meaningful in reflecting the intangibility of these covert actions, in representing the lack of clear material traces of what had happened. This absence within the landscape was framed by a suspicion of secrecy as *itself* suggestive, intimating the possibility that this inscrutable terrain was obscuring or tainting any public traces of ongoing counter-terrorism efforts. As with rural lynchings, the landscape was implicitly represented as possibly 'complicit' in violence, in this case in its secrecy. But because this same landscape reflected an ambiguity of knowledge, that complicity was represented as

significant because neither provable nor disprovable. The ethical orientation this shapes is one narrowly focused on the suggestiveness of the barren desert, on whether the absence of residue within it reveals anything. From this subject-position, the violence of these operations is significant in reflecting that inability to determine anything for certain. As with lynchings in the rural United States, interest in the violence's wider social dynamics is negated, as its meaningful context is restricted to natural geography.

Beyond the extremities

The previous empirical chapters demonstrate that covert counter-terrorism is ascribed wider significance through possibilities suggested by intimations. That unspoken meaningfulness and significance is signified as a meaning and significance *for* someone. The articulations of press and social media coverage presume, and explicitly or implicitly position readers within, a particular relevant readership. News coverage “address[es] interpretive communities” by “point[ing] to its context”, by making textual and visual references that require newsreaders to position themselves within that interpretive community in order to understand these references' contextualised meaning (Dekavalla, 2010: 640). Within that context, secrecy and absence are able to intimate meanings that exceed those given to these events by explicit articulations. But these intimations are then able to shape the represented (un)importance of these operations to the interpretive community that is being addressed by that coverage, provided these intimations are recognised *from* that subject-position.

As has been discussed, the representational dynamic that shapes this significance can be illuminated through an historical affiliation with lynching in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In both historical cases,

violence is represented as difficult to comprehend, owing to its apparent distance from that society and the obfuscation of its political dynamics that this involves – for instance, through the secretion of the body. Lynching in contemporaneous public debate was contextualised and historicised in ways that tried to explain its emergence and persistence. At the same time, news and literary representations of the practice portrayed the violence in ways that centred the supposed incomprehensibility of what was happening, the challenge of relating the violence to the perceived social dynamics of modern society. This framing echoed a popular fixation on the most spectacular aspects of the violence, those that were rarely documented for a national news-readership but which had come to define lynching. “[A] mob, a noose, a swinging body defiled”, was seen to constitute both the practice and what it was that made it so disturbing for the national population (Trotti, 2014: 852). It was the spectacle of the body and the mob, unseen but vividly imagined through news and literary accounts, that constituted lynching's violent epicentre.

Consequently, lynching in public discourse was defined through the extremities of its violence in a way that de-contextualised it, removing lynching from its position within a wider spectrum of terrorising violence against black individuals and communities; this violence and humiliation did not share in the spectacle of mob murder but nonetheless intersected it as efforts to maintain white domination in parts of the United States (K. Williams, 2005). This de-contextualisation had the knock-on effect of delimiting the political dynamics of lynching, of what that practice looked like and how it was perpetrated, which set narrow criteria for identifying and articulating whether the practice was sustaining itself or was floundering. As a result of this focus on the extremities of this violence, the reduced observance of those extremities from the late 1930s onwards produced a narrative that lynching was declining. This gradual

disappearance of the spectacle of the mob lynching was given particular significance in public discussion: given that lynching had been represented nationally as aberrant within and therefore a challenge to the progress of modern society, the fading of precisely those spectacular elements thought to reflect this challenge was seen to signal the winning out of that progress (Rushdy, 2012: 100-5). Lynching's disconnect from wider society was seen to be confirmed. Whatever "social order that sanctioned [this] form of racial violence" was perceived as disappearing along with lynching's extremities, and the end of the "anomal[y]" of this practice was given meaning as "a sign of... a mature and civilised society" (ibid: 102, 105).

The focus on the extremities of lynching violence therefore delimited understandings of the latter's political dynamics in a way that obscured the dynamic that was being perpetuated through the consumption of national media coverage. The interpretive communities signified by this news coverage gave the violence meaning in terms of a national newsreadership's struggle to comprehend it, marginalising the relevance of lynch victims themselves to their being mere indicators of this struggle. Defining lynching through the spectacle of the mob and lynched body deterred acknowledgement of the role that this subject-position itself might play in shaping how this violence and solutions to it were considered. With the decline of the spectacle lynching, the discursive structures implicated in that violence were thought to have eroded; representations of the practice that shaped subject-positions of incomprehension were not considered within those structures. This demonstrates that the "stakes of [a] fixation on the extremities of the practice" were bound up in how that practice was represented in relation to wider society, and whether public discourse would affiliate that violence with other practices within society that produced similar discursive dynamics but "did not "look" like lynching murders" from the perspective of

its most spectacular manifestations (Goldsby, 2006: 284, 289).

The popular conceptualisation of lynching through its extremities provides an opening to consider what ethical responsiveness towards covert action residue might mean. The critical literature on ethical witnessing of counter-terrorism has largely stayed within the analytic discussed in the Introduction: that ethics depends upon whether markers of the subjectivities of those targeted by these covert operations are present in representations of their suffering, since those markers are necessary for witnesses to 'respond to', and thus recognise the ethical import of, that suffering. The absence of those markers allows for prisoners, suspected insurgents or simply those made casualties of counter-terrorism to be demonised or dehumanised, their subjectivities warped or effaced to portray their suffering as unworthy of an ethical consideration that would contest this violence. Those witnesses who adopt this understanding of casualties are therefore complicit in a state rationalisation of violence. That counter-terrorism should pose this challenge to ethical witnessing is a claim based on iconic glimpses of these operations: those which display the manipulated or mutilated body alongside its controlling counter-terrorist agents – most notably, the prisoners and soldiers of Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay (Apel, 2005; Dauphinée, 2007; Van Veeren, 2011) – and those which remove those bodies entirely from the representational field, representing counter-terrorism through military-technological lenses (Mirzoeff, 2005; Stahl, 2010). As iconic glimpses, these representations have been seen to capture the meaning of the wider practices they instantiate. It is significant, then, that these glimpses reveal the supposed extremities of contemporary counter-terrorism, the act of inflicting violence, by representing either violated bodies or the spectacular effects of military power. It is the extremities of counter-terrorist violence that have become iconic.

Residue offers no such glimpse. It is related in news coverage to those extremities, and perpetually hints at possibilities surrounding the enactment of violence, but it does so by representing counter-terrorism through the latter's arbitrary remainders. Residue therefore challenges the analytic of ethical witnessing repeated in the literature on counter-terrorism. Public traces of the materials, spaces and networks that supported black site detention challenge bodily glimpses of violence 'standing in' for rendition and detention, as if they encapsulate the political dynamics of the practice. With these public traces circulating alongside those more iconic glimpses, they re-situate the question of ethical witnessing by suggesting that they too are part of the dynamics that constitute this violence, that materialise it in the world through representational practices.

These traces of the operation of black sites therefore challenge the ideas of causation, maintenance and historical affinities which are signified by the most visceral bodily markers of this U.S. state activity. When taken as constitutive of the practice, the latter markers offer a sharply circumscribed idea of what is required to contest the meanings ascribed to this practice. The spectacle of suffered bodies and controlling guards frames the issue of witnessing as, once again, one of assent or dissent towards violence that is rationalised by state narratives of its actions. In the same move, this spectacle circumscribes the historical lineage of this violence, suggesting that scholars and commentators look to violence which took a similar representational form to these extremities in order to understand what ethical challenge they pose. This circumscription ultimately suggests that so far as ethical witnessing is concerned, responding to the extremities of this violence is key; the suffering body comes to encapsulate the ethical challenge posed by this practice. The question then becomes how much this glimpse of violence's extremities allows us to see: is it possible to recognise

the experience of suffering and thus its ethical import? Responding ethically to these state practices is translated as recognising how the bodies of those targeted “speak of and through [their] damaged corporeality” (Adelman, 2009: 52). That signification of suffering is now *demand*ed of those bodies, on the grounds that the imaginative recognition of subjectivities produces dissent towards those state actions (ibid: 65-75). It becomes difficult to imagine that an ethical witnessing of counter-terrorism violence could come about in any other way.

While critical scholarship raises the question of recognisability in order to provoke questions of witnesses' complicity in hegemonic discourses of state violence, this framing of ethical responsiveness centres the extremities of state practices and dismisses the representational dynamics of its residue as irrelevant to that violence. The idea that an ethical response must recognise suffering and the conceptualisation of counter-terrorism through the infliction and embodiment of violence end up mutually supporting one another. This consequently gives a narrow view of how such state violence exists in the public sphere and who becomes involved in its representational dynamics through acts of witnessing. Glimpses of the suffering body involve witnesses in the meanings attached to covert violence; but residue also involves them, in a manner that is just as significant. By positioning newsreaders in relation to both the unseen casualties and the state perpetrator of covert operations, residue shapes how newsreaders are prompted to see the significance of foreign policy actions that they cannot witness. Residue need not represent suffering to nonetheless “establish the conditions of possibility for a political response” to this violence (Campbell, 2007: 361). Focusing on the extremities will obscure the ethical orientations from news coverage which perpetuate covert violence's discursive dynamics, and therefore will overlook what an ethics of witnessing might mean in the case of contemporary covert counter-

terrorism. Ethics, then, must be decoupled from suffering.

Resisting recovery

If we do turn to the seemingly arbitrary remainders of covert counter-terrorism, what kind of ethical witnessing can be gained from them? Key to answering this is *what* exactly this residue signifies to witnesses that they are witnessing. As this thesis has argued, residue signifies that it does not document a claimed event but its aftermath, and that therefore it cannot offer a glimpse of the event and of those involved. But intimations produced by this residue do prompt witnesses to adopt positions of understanding in relation to both casualties and the state perpetrator of this violence, despite the signified absence of these figures from the public sphere. Absences within residue do not remain inert indicators that something is missing, but are made suggestive by secrecy and hint at ideas about what is absent.

The analyses of previous chapters, however, suggest that these intimations cannot be said to prompt ethical witnessing. The ethical orientations produced by these hints and allusions – that is, what these hints prompt witnesses to believe is acceptable to think and feel towards unseen violence, absent casualties and the state – are rather narrow. These orientations focus on unverifiable possibilities suggested by equivocal absences, and their implications for an addressed interpretive community. These possibilities include the idea that covert drone strikes are too ephemeral to establish in their aftermath who exactly they killed; that documentation of Osama bin Laden's death and corpse is being kept secret to prevent alternative readings of the raid that killed him; and that events in the Sahara-Sahel are simply unknowable due to their obscuration and disappearance within a vast barren landscape. If the simplest definition

of ethics is that which concerns “the conduct of the subject toward another... as a subject in her own right” (Adelman and Kozol, 2014), then the ethical orientations produced by intimations of covert action's intangibility only weakly address that conduct. The potential ethical import of the violence inflicted by these operations – that is, a consideration of this violence in terms of the conduct of both state and witness towards other subjects, an acknowledgement and interrogation of the possibility that this violence challenges or breaches an ethical form of such conduct – is marginalised. The violence perpetrated by the state is represented as discomfiting on the grounds of its intangibility, while casualties enter the lens of this ethical orientation only as reflecting this intangibility.

What, then, would constitute ethical responsiveness towards this residue and its absences? It is worth repeating Adelman and Kozol's definition of recognising the other as a subject in her own right, as quoted in the Introduction: this recognition “is more than being aware of [other subjects'] existence, or curious about their circumstances, or able to see them, or saddened by the thought of their pain; it is an attunement to their capacity to suffer, the ascription of ethical urgency or significance to that suffering, and a consideration of how I, as a spectator, might be involved in it” (ibid). What do we think is necessary for the rumours and debris left by unseen violence to allow for an attunement to beings' capacity to suffer, to prompt an ascription of urgency to that suffering, and to invite witnesses to consider their potential involvement in it?

In asserting what is required for this attunement, critical scholarship on representations of war and counter-terrorism frequently asks whether representations allow for an ethical 'encounter' between witnesses and those represented, “an empathetic encounter” which allows for “the possibility for viewing [others] as equal” and therefore “entitled to the same [treatment]” as us (Van Veeren, 2011: 1735). A

recognition of the ethical import of others' suffering is framed in this scholarship as requiring co-presence with that suffering, in order that witnesses are then prompted *by* that suffering to think and feel differently. To recognise others' subjectivity is to acknowledge the legitimacy of their claim for recognition, which can in turn “challenge... a prevailing rule or norm” of what qualifies as being recognisable (Brincat, 2014: 401). It is in this sense that Butler foregrounds the importance of those norms that determine how one qualifies for recognition *as human*, as entering the category of human with the ethical worth that accrues from this (Butler, 2009). The problem with this formulation of ethical witnessing is that it is uncertain whether the imaginative experience of encountering suffering subjectivities necessarily produces ethical witnessing. Just as the norms of humanness are reiterated over time, so markers of subjectivity and of suffering experience are not universal and objective, but are socio-culturally constructed. To invest in an affective response to such markers is to ignore the potential fallibility of such a response. Suffering may be misread or easily ignored.

Beyond the normative problem with defining ethical witnessing as the recognition of subjectivities, it is worth considering *why* recognition is put forward as ethical responsiveness, and what *analytic* this position encourages towards representations of state violence, the scholarly attitude that is adopted. These issues together hint at an alternative understanding of ethical responsiveness in the case of covert action residue. To answer the *why* question first, the scholarly desire to locate markers of subjectivity within representations of war stems from the perceived need to prevent dehumanisation. That dehumanisation is a result of state narratives for its violence which, by pre-conditioning public discourse, pre-empt how witnesses understand glimpses of state violence as meaningful (Shepherd, 2008). In so doing, those glimpses are framed as echoing the terms of these narratives, as being intelligible

through those narratives. When those terms dehumanise sufferers, the glimpsed violence inflicted on those sufferers is consequently rationalised. If ethics is therefore about disrupting that rationalisation by recognising subjectivity, ethics is turned into a matter of resistance, a resistance of state rationalisations. This understanding of ethics in turn suggests that the normative stance of critical scholars should be one of 'dissidence', a refusal to allow people and practices to be incorporated within a hegemonic discourse that would subsume the singularity of their identities, that would "impose and fix ways of knowing" those "deterritorialised and decentred sites of political life", so as to "legitim[ise] the violence of the modern state" towards them (Ashley and Walker, 1990: 263, 261, 262). The search for ethical responsiveness is consequently framed as resistance towards hegemonic modes of knowing that already pre-condition public discourse, and would otherwise rationalise state violence.

The problem with parsing ethics, in witnessing and in scholarship, as resistance is that, as demonstrated through this thesis, while the United States provides general rationalisations of ongoing counter-terrorism strategy, potentially allowing covert operations to be rationalised along those lines, the secrecy that is signified by the residue of these operations is not rationalised by the state when represented in public discourse. And in cases where secrecy is addressed, as in the bin Laden raid, the rationale for the covertness is partial and ambiguous, failing to cover all public traces of these operation. The meaning of this secrecy, and the meaning it gives in turn to unseen state violence, is therefore not pre-conditioned by the state. As a result, intimations produced by the residue of covert counter-terrorism undermine any rationalisation of these operations on the more general grounds that the state does articulate. These intimations thereby undermine the demonisation or dehumanisation of absent casualties; they are not represented in ways that conform to state narratives of its own

actions, but indeed are alluded to as possibly undermining the terms of those narratives. A state rationalisation of its violence is therefore not what is curtailing an ethical consideration of the violence committed in these cases. Resistance is not the appropriate definition of ethical witnessing here – it takes the the hegemony of state rationalisations of violence for granted, and foregrounds witnesses' relationship to the state perpetrator of these covert activities, at the expense of the relationship that witnesses have with the non-state residue that these activities leave behind. In the representations covered in this thesis, it is that residue, and the absences and intimations that materialise because of it, which demands an ethical response and poses a challenge to ethical witnessing, not frames of meaning disseminated by the state.

What analytic, then, does a view of ethics as recognition of subjectivities propose? This understanding of ethics places a particular kind of demand upon representations, a demand that it provide the means to resist demonisation and dehumanisation, namely markers of suffering. Ethics is consequently translated into a practice of recovery, whereby both scholars and witnesses sift through these representations for evidence of the lived experience of those whose injuries and deaths are the product of that which is documented for us. Recovery constitutes a particular approach to absence, a witnessing act that attempts to make things present, to salvage hidden significations in a move akin to archaeology (Wylie, 2009: 279). Rebecca Adelman argues that the reproduction and endless scrutinising of the Abu Ghraib torture photographs by critical scholars, despite the inability of those tortured bodies to consent, reflects a belief in “a civic duty to undo Abu Ghraib” by “confronting” these images in a “persist[ent]... effort to extract meaning” from them (Adelman, 2009: 67, 73). To insist that such representations can produce meanings outside a dehumanising frame is to demand that representations be able to offer up the lived suffering of others (Abbas,

2010).

That demand, and the impulse to recovery motivated by it, will be frustrated by covert action residue, as those who are made casualties of these operations are signified as absent from the speculations and piles of debris that witnesses are left to encounter. This residue is made meaningful in these representations as lacking markers of subjectivity because the bodies that would instantiate those markers are not co-present with witnesses within this residue. To demand that residue offer up these markers is too ask something of these representations that they cannot offer; to demand witnesses keep looking for these markers is to ask for a great individual effort of witnessing that is both difficult to motivate, given residue does not itself prompt it, and to risk fatalism.

The practice of recovery has a further consequence which allows for the formulation of an alternative to ethics-as-resistance. In his discussion of textual and visual documentation of slavery in the Americas, Stephen Best notes a similar desire and frustration on the part of the scholars. Historians have constructed new methodologies for discovering traces within this archive of slaves' lived experience, for uncovering "critical truths... hidden in unalloyed traces". Yet this search has led those same scholars to confront the ethical dilemma of relying on an archive, in the form of documentation *by* slavery institutions, that was implicated in the very process of effacing the ethical worth of slaves. The archive, in other words, offers up traces of slaves "recorded in the act of their annihilation", making for "an impoverished archive" (Best, 2011: 159). The temptation of scholars faced with this impoverishment is to invest that slavery archive with a reification of the loss at its heart. Thus documents of slavery are made meaningful within "a narrative of the impossibility of retrieval", whereby the "desire to recover the evidence of lives apparently lost to history" makes any trace of those lives within this archive appear to further confirm that loss, to *reiterate* that impossibility of

recovery, through those traces' elliptical quality (ibid: 156). This reification of loss and the endless confirmation that recovery is impossible is a possibility that is similarly present in the question of an ethical response to covert action residue. In the face of this dilemma, Best challenges scholars to abandon "the imperative to recover" which reifies loss, and to therefore "[stop] presuming absence" as if that absence is always evidence of the *need* for its replacement with presence (ibid: 159, 160).

It is this turn away from recovery that would allow for ethical responsiveness in the case of residue. Instead of fighting against the absences in residue, and try to recover significations which are supposedly obscured by that dynamic, an ethical response would let absence be. It would focus on examining the process by which absences, and the people and objects they speak to, are implicitly given meaning within these representations, a process that otherwise goes unnoticed by witnesses because the meanings being ascribed to absences and absentees are not explicitly articulated within these portrayals. Without presuming to identify and come to 'know' experiences of suffering, this kind of responsiveness nonetheless acknowledges the ethical significance of suffering that remains absent. It also crucially examines the role of the witness, her role in marginalising the violence of these operations through ethical orientations that only narrowly address this violent conduct towards other subjects.

An ethical responsiveness that resists the impulse towards recovery is in fact already present within a concept threaded throughout this thesis, that of historical affiliation. The ethical import of this approach to traces of unseen violence is implicit in W.G. Sebald's prose work *The Rings of Saturn*, whose narrative weaves together residue of different violence events to produce imaginative archives that are premised precisely on "the impossibility of recovery". The accumulated memories and debris of *Rings* represent "a repository of... depletion without end", of traces that endlessly hint at

“people, events and stories as permanently irrecoverable” (Sheehan, 2012: 736). In the face of this “depletion without end” (ibid), Sebald's narrative 'suspends' that depletion by implicitly connecting historical events. Rather than bemoan a “stringent [notion] of absolute loss”, the narrative of *Rings* circumvents that temporal loss by “produc[ing] new [historical] affiliations”, through “a constellation of incongruous, semi-surreal... relationships” of coincidence across time (ibid: 737). As discussed in the Introduction and chapter two, when traces of contrasting violence are narratively associated in this way, the resonance of their similar qualities – for instance, their absences – can prompt the reader to consider relationships between those events, not in terms of 'what happened', but in terms of how these events gain meaning and significance through traces in ways that go unspoken (Bernstein, 2009: 45-50). By highlighting inconspicuous similarities in the representation of intuitively quite different events, historical affiliation can prompt different ethical orientations towards those events and the violence that was involved. Historical affiliation is not just a method, but a model of ethical responsiveness to residue.

Ethical witnessing here is not premised on recovering and recognising suffering, but on recognising how witnesses are being prompted to adopt ethical orientations towards unseen violence and absent casualties that make those things meaningful in ways that go unspoken, that are implicit rather than explicit, and thus are not signified to witnesses as such. The reason this response to representations of residue is ethical is that, to follow Adelman and Kozol's definition, an attunement to other beings' capacity to suffer need not involve imagining that one can *identify* and thus *respond* to an experience of suffering within a representation. An attunement to that capacity to suffer can exist towards those we never see and are never co-present with. The second and third criteria then become crucial: ascribing ethical significance to that suffering and an

examination of how we might be involved in it. An historical affiliation does not guarantee meeting the second criterion, but it meets the third by prompting an examination of one's own ethical orientations, and thus prompts witnesses to consider *how* ethical significance is being ascribed or denied to absent victims of violence in ways that do not draw attention to themselves.

When applied to the rumours and debris of covert counter-terrorism, this practice of turning away from recovery and towards the affiliation of residue can prompt a self-awareness that in this way challenges the ethical orientations discussed throughout this thesis. The historical affiliation between covert counter-terrorism and lynching produces this kind of ethical witnessing by highlighting how representations of these covert operations' residue prompt witnesses to adopt an ethical orientation that marginalises the violence inflicted by these operations, that fails to consider the ethical import of that violence, as something that demands ethical consideration in-and-of-itself. This ethical responsiveness is not about adopting a position of dissent towards covert violence through one's witnessing of its traces, although such a response may be ethically defensible. Rather, it is about scrutinising thoughts and feelings that this residue already invites one to adopt and, insodoing, examining what one occludes from one's thoughts and feelings as a result without that occlusion being spoken. In this sense, this form of ethical responsiveness *is* about questioning whether the positions that witnesses take towards covert violence as a result of its residue can be considered ethical position simply because they involve scepticism and discomfort towards the actions of the state. While some may call for outrage in response to these covert activities, implying that current levels are insufficient (T. Gregory, 2012), the historical affiliation approach acknowledges the understandings and affects prompted by residue that might already curtail assent but equally complicate notions of dissent.

The historical affiliation with lynching referenced throughout this thesis has suggested that witnesses are invited to adopt a subject-position from which these covert events are *distanced from her*. As the thesis has demonstrated, the orientations prompted by the residue of covert counter-terrorism are ones that think of the unverifiable possibilities suggested by absences in residue, and that therefore feel discomfort towards the intangibility of these unseen operations, their perceived distance from the populations of the states pursuing these policies. As with lynching, these practices become meaningful in terms of 'confronting' society with the problem of understanding, rather than implicating that society in any way.

Given this production of distance – spatial, temporal and ultimately moral – between witnesses and covert counter-terrorism, the historical affiliation with lynching can prompt self-awareness in terms of witnesses' *connection* to these operations *through* residue: that beyond the extremities of state violence, these rumours and debris are also part of the public existence of these operations, and newsreaders' encounters with these traces make these unseen events meaningful in particular ways. Ethical witnessing would involve self-awareness of two things: first, of how the narrative of intangibility is a product of this relationship between newsreaders and residue; and second, of how that narrative positions witnesses towards absent casualties and the state in unspoken ways, focusing critique and scrutiny on some aspects of these covert operations but occluding others. Through this residue, witnesses' critical response to covert action becomes defined by the idea of distance, an epistemological and thus moral distance between the public and these operations. Ethical witnessing would question whether this is a sufficiently ethical response to the unseen violence at the centre of these events.

Residue cannot foster this kind of ethical witnessing alone. To reverse the critical scholarship's notion of recognition, residue does not return the gaze of the

witness or “look back in unexpected ways” (Kozol, 2014: 91), a discordant signification that might prompt the witness to become “‘conscious’ of himself [sic], leading to his need to turn this gaze around and look at himself” (Chow, 2003: 342). What residue offers is more akin to a blank gaze, an encounter where that which is being witnessed does not appear to ‘recognise’ or respond to the witness, as theorised by Anat Pick in relation to creaturely representations of humans and animals (Pick, 2011: 155-62). Such blankness is unlikely by itself to motivate witnesses to some form of action against suffering, the “burden of making something happen” that is often placed on representations of such suffering (Adelman and Kozol, 2014).

But if allowed to reverberate with other historical practices of violence through their shared absences, residue *can* provoke a rethinking of what ethical witnessing might mean, by highlighting parts of, and banishments from, our ethical orientations that we do not notice ourselves. Responding to that blank gaze does not mean continuing to search within it for something that simply is not there; it means scrutinising the ways we are already implicitly provoked by that blankness, acknowledging how we end up seeing that blankness as indicating one thing (distance) rather than another (connectedness). And this acknowledgement can only happen by seeing the ethical stakes in our methodologies towards traces of unseen violence, and giving up on recovering a real gaze within the fragmented statements, grainy footage and empty spaces left behind by covert counter-terrorism. “For what is ethics if not my seeing without being seen – my unrequited attention?” (Pick, 2011: 159).

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